



Edited by  
**Daniel Ungureanu**  
and **Cristian Nae**

# **DIGITAL POLITICS OF THE VISUAL GLOBAL AGE**

Presa Universitară Clujeană

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**Presa Universitară Clujeană**

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## Contents

Contributors .....	v
Editors .....	x
Introduction .....	xii
Part I: Protesting Nowadays: How Medium is Changing the Game? ...	1
1    Artist Dialogue for Social Change: An Outsider's View of the Walls of Santiago	
Angelica J. Huizar .....	2
2    Resistance Stance in Nigerian Digital Space: A Critical Stylistic Appraisal of Discourse Issues in Oduduwa Nation Secessionist Narrative in Nairaland	
Richard Damilare Akano.....	16
3    Portraying the Bad: Soft Repressions Used by the Polish Public Television During the First Wave of the Women's Protests in 2020- 2021	
Karolina Owczarek .....	43
Part II: Memory and Trauma in Crisis Representations.....	62
4    Breakdown Lockdown: Visual Representation of Crisis During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Popular Music Videos	
Alessa K. Paluch .....	75
5    Beautiful Faraway? Victory Day, War and Time-Traveling on TikTok	
Anna Greszta .....	94

6	Understanding the Trauma and Evil of the 2023 Hamas Attacks on Israel Via Online Behavior and Media	
	Eric D. Miller .....	131
	Part III: Narratives of Cultural Shift and Identity Construction .....	140
7	The Hyperlocal Global Skepticism Age	
	Ruby Thelot .....	141
8	The Da Vinci Code: A postpartum of Y2k	
	Cru Encarnação .....	160
9	Representing Manly Men: Social Media Images and their Precedents in United States Political Pictures	
	Allison K. Lange .....	197
10	Visualizing Moroccan Cultural Dialogics: Mapping the Micro-Conflictuality of Cultural Modernity on Facebook	
	Driss Faddouli .....	213

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**Allison K. Lange** focuses on images, gender, and politics in United States history. She is an associate professor of history at the Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. In 2020, the University of Chicago Press published Lange’s book, “Picturing Political Power: Images in the Women’s Suffrage Movement.” Other selected recent writings include: “The Legacy of the Nineteenth Amendment Centennial” for the journal *Transatlantica*; “Suffragists Still Shape Representations of their Movement” in *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000* (2020); “Suffrage during the Pandemics of 1918 and 2020,” for the journal *Idées d’Amérique* (October 2020); and “How Susan B. Anthony Became the Most Recognizable Suffragist,” for The Suff Buffs for the U.S. Congress’s Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission and National Park Service (April 2020).



**Eric D. Miller**, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Kent State University in East Liverpool, Ohio (USA). He earned his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Iowa and has published numerous papers focusing on how adults adjust to adverse events. Dr. Miller is the author of *The Psychology of Adjustment and Coping* (BVT Publishing) and the *COVID-19 Crisis: Key Social and Psychological Issues* (Vernon Press). He has also edited *Stories of Complicated Grief: A Critical Anthology* (NASW Press) and co-edited books published by Taylor & Francis and Routledge: "Loss and Trauma: General and Close Relationship Perspectives" (with J. H. Harvey) and "Narratives of Loneliness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the 21st Century" (with O. Sagan). He has served in editorial roles for the *Journal of Loss and Trauma* and on editorial boards for various other journals.

**Karolina Owczarek** is a Ph.D. student in Political Science and Administration. She holds a degree in National Security from Adam Mickiewicz University. Her research interests focus on the repression of citizens in democratic countries, as well as social movements advocating for women's rights and the LGBT+ community.

**Alessa K. Paluch** is a Visual Studies scholar and art historian. She works as a research assistant at the Department of Art History at Greifswald University, Germany, with a teaching focus on modern and contemporary art. She received her PhD from the Free University Berlin and studied Theatre Science and Art History at Leipzig University. In her doctoral thesis, she defined and analyzed non-iconic images such as

selfies, paparazzi photography, and internet pornography, and their impact on everyday visual culture. Her research focuses on vernacular visual culture, artistic visual practices, and visual literacy. Currently, she is researching artistic visual practices that integrate found visual material. Paluch is the author of “Nicht-ikonische Bilder: Herrschaftskritische Perspektiven auf zeitgenössische Bildkulturen,” published by Transcript Verlag.

**Ruby Thelot** is a designer, cyberethnographer and artist based in New York. He is an adjunct professor of Media Theory at NYU and the founder of the award-winning creative research and design studio 13101401 inc. His work centers on the interactions between humans and artificial intelligence, the metaverse, and the implications of being-on-line. He has given talks and showcased his works in various locations, including Tallinn, Berlin and Abuja. Ruby holds a Masters in Design and Technology from the Parsons School of Design and a Bachelor in Business from McGill University.

## Editors

**Cristian Nae** earned a PhD in Philosophy at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iasi. At the moment, he is a professor dr. habil. within the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design from UNAGE in Iasi, and the director of the Multidisciplinary Research Institute in Art (ICMA). His research focuses on critical art, exhibition studies and contemporary art theory. He received research grants from the Erste Foundation (2010-2011), the Getty Foundation and the “New Europe College” Institute of Advanced Studies in Bucharest (2010; 2011-2012) and the CAA-Getty international program (2012; 2017; 2021). He coordinated two research projects dedicated to art exhibitions in Romania and Eastern Europe during the socialist period, funded by CNCS-UEFISCDI (2015-2016 and 2018-2020). He was a senior consultant in the project “Periodisation in the History of Art and its Conundrums. How to tackle them in East-Central Europe” funded by the Getty Foundation within the *Connecting Art Histories* initiative (2019-2021). He is a member of the International Committee of the College Arts Association in the US, the European Association for Modernism and Avant-Garde Studies and the International Association of Art Critics. He participated in conferences organized by CAA, AAH, ASEEES, The Clark Art Institute, INHA Paris or ZIKG Munich. His studies have been included in collective

volumes such as *Art History in a Global Context* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), *Realisms of the Avant-Garde* (de Gruyter, 2020), *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere* (Routledge, 2018) or *Curating Eastern Europe and Beyond: Art Histories through the Exhibition* (Peter Lang, 2013). Recently, he edited the publications *(In)visible frames* (Idea, 2019) and *Romanian Contemporary Art 2010-2020* (Hatje Cantz, 2020). He curated Romania's participation in the 58th edition of the Venice Biennale (2019).

**Daniel Ungureanu** is an Assistant Lecturer at the George Enescu National University of Arts, where he teaches Modern and Contemporary Art History, Visual Studies, and Academic Writing. He holds a PhD in Visual Arts from the same university and has conducted research on Epidemic Theories, Epistemic Practices, and Artistic Research Design at the University of Gothenburg. His current research focuses on digital culture, social media ideologies, and power relations. He is a member of various academic organizations (AAMG, BAN, ICMA) and has presented his research at international conferences (Canada, the United States, Portugal, South Africa). He is also a co-author of a volume on Academic Writing for art students: “Cum scriem un text despre artă : ghid practic pentru studenții facultăților de arte vizuale” (with Oana Maria Nae).

## Introduction

In the age of digital inter-connectedness, our world is becoming increasingly defined by the media we consume and share. The screens that surround us—from smartphones to billboards—shape political discourse, drive social movements, and mold cultural identities (Coleman, 2015; Manovich, 2006; Melro & Oliveira, 2018; Verhoeff, 2012). But what does this mean for society, in general, and for the individual, in particular? Why should we care about these images and messages circulated in our digital or virtual worlds? In 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine flooded traditional and digital media with static and moving images (Ciuriak, 2022; Pavlik, 2022), including newsreels, amateur and drone footage, or satellite imagery that displayed military force abuse, violence against civilians, shelling, damaged and destroyed buildings, and people leaving their homes and country in what was described as the largest exodus since WW2 (Costa & Sánchez, 2022; Newbold, 2022). While social media was banned in Russia and started, in return, to track and control information related to war all over the world, fake news and image manipulation reached maximum levels (Azzimonti & Fernandes, 2022; Ruffo et al., 2023) and seemed to be a novelty in re-creating an old-World War discourse within the EU.

Such imagery of socially and politically disruptive events, that follow globalization paths was already present in contemporary visual culture for the last two decades, long before this event (Gaufman, 2015; Oates, 2016). Attempts to manipulate, control, divert and even capitalize such visual data have been integrated to the contemporary crisis management of military conflicts and health emergencies that take place in other parts of the world beyond Europe (Kozol, 2014;

Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Stubblefield, 2015). The conjunction of bio, necro, and psychopolitics (Foucault, 2009; Han, 2017; Mbembe, 2003), on the one hand, and digitally produced and circulated images associated with socially and politically disruptive events, on the other hand, raises several questions such as the following: What are the main differences between the reproduction and production of these events in the digital media realm? What is their social impact? How did digital productions articulate and/or calibrate political and traditional media discourses? What trends and digital policies can be linked to the control and dissemination of imagery through social networks? What are the main differences between wars, pandemics, and other forms of social unrest? How did digitality mediate the discourse on COVID-19 and influence netizens? How did the latter contribute to the spread of panic and the creation of an infodemic and, eventually, a climate of fear? Soon after, how has digitality changed the way in which the world perceives the Russian-Ukrainian conflict? How are the EU and US's geopolitical implications and power relations reflected in the digital mediascape? At the same time, what role does digitally co-produced images such as memes play in the dissemination, circulation, and criticism of information? What types of civic and political resistance were or can still be imagined by artists and netizens alike?

*Digital Politics of the Visual Global Age* builds on analogous interrogations and, in concept, on the foundational works of scholars such as Manuel Castells (1996, 2004, 2011), who sketched and debated the rise of digital and information technologies and how it transforms economies, societies, and cultures into interconnected network structures, with varied impacts across different cultural contexts, and Henry Jenkins (2006, 2009), Mizuko Ito, and Danah Boyd (2016), who observed how participatory culture, facilitated by digital media,

transforms education, youth engagement, media consumption, and social participation, emphasizing the need for new media literacy and the diverse impacts of these cultural shifts. Additionally, it draws on contemporary studies that address the part of visual media in social movements and identity construction, such as Zizi Papacharissi's (2015) work on digital media platforms' power to shape public discourse by facilitating emotionally charged narratives or José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal's (2018) research on digital platforms' dynamic actions of reshaping social, economic, and political structures.

The primary objective of *Digital Politics of the Visual Global Age* is to elucidate the transformative power of digital visual media in present-day society and, by extension, to offer a nuanced analysis of how it can influence public perception, mobilize social movements, and alter historical narratives. By presenting an assortment of case studies and employing diverse theoretical frameworks, we ultimately seek to highlight the complex dynamics between digital media and societal change. Finally, as an unabridged effort, we aim to report challenges posed by digital media, such as the spread of misinformation, media manipulation, and the erosion of trust in visual content which, in due course, will foster critical media literacy and a deeper understanding of digital visual culture.

There are three wide-ranging parts between here and the back cover. Each will address distinct but interrelated aspects of digital politics and visual culture. The first one is "Protesting Nowadays: How Medium is Changing the Game," and it focuses on the role of digital media in contemporary protest movements. Angelica J. Huizar provides a witty investigation of the 2019 Chilean protests through Carola Ureta Marín's photographic exhibition, "Ciudad como texto,"

which captures the visual manifestations of social justice and popular resistance. In addition, Richard Damilare Akano explores the digital discourse of the Oduduwa nation secessionist movement on Nairaland, a prominent Nigerian digital community. He uses critical linguistics to demonstrate how netizens legitimize their resistance and secessionist activities. In an attempt to reveal the media's role in undermining and discrediting social movements, Karolina Owczarek tops the first part of this volume with a study on Polish National Television and how it employed soft repression tactics against the Women's Strike protests in 2020-2021.

The second part, "Memory and Trauma in Crisis Representations," focuses on visualizing crisis or *crisis visualization* and its impact on collective memory and trauma. Discussing Bon Jovi and BTS, Alessa K. Paluch will put in the limelight music videos produced during the pandemic. She asks and tries to answer questions like: How do these music videos reflect the experiences and feelings of people? And, perhaps more importantly, what messages of resilience and emotional coping do they convey? Later on, in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Anna Greszta will not only explain the cultural significance of the song "Beautiful Faraway" but also of its modern adaptations, present and circulated on YouTube and TikTok. This placement and analysis within the broader framework of Soviet and post-Soviet cultural memory attunes and ushers in Eric D. Miller's text that probes the portrayal of violence in online media, particularly the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel. By this means, he highlights the dual impact of imagery in its ability to evoke empathy and potential manipulation.

The third and final part, "Narratives of Cultural Shift and Identity Construction," intends to show how digital media can



determine identity formation and destabilization in response to paradigm changes. Ruby Thelot follows the philosophical roots of skepticism and brings to our attention the global distrust in visual media, driven by advancements in image manipulation and AI-generated content. With a combination of personal memories and a critical analysis of the era's anxieties, Cru Encarnação reflects on the cultural and social impacts of the Y2K phenomenon and gives prominence to the Y2K as a significant moment in the digital age's collective consciousness. From Allison K. Lange, we are informed about former President Donald Trump's use of hypermasculine imagery and its cultural and political implications. Lange contrasts Trump's portrayals with those of other historical figures and discusses the enduring appeal of traditional masculine imagery in American politics. Lastly, to emphasize the strategic use of digital literacy to influence public discourse and power dynamics in society, Driss Faddouli will discuss Moroccan Facebook users and how they engage with sociopolitical issues through visual content like memes and cartoons.

*Digital Politics of the Visual Global Age* offers a rich tapestry of case studies and theoretical insights, providing a nuanced understanding of our digital visual era. Therefore, we hope it will not only inform but also inspire critical engagement with the digital media landscape.

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## **Part I**

# **Protesting Nowadays: How Medium is Changing the Game?**

# **1     **Artist Dialogue for Social Change****

## **An Outsider's View of the Walls of Santiago**

*Angelica J. Huizar*

Artist Carola Ureta Marín produced a digital photographic exhibition based on the 36<sup>th</sup> day of protests in Santiago. *Ciudad como texto* features graffiti as a visual manifestation of social justice, it showcases roughly 2.4 kilometers of street graffiti made in response to one of the most important social movements in Chilean recent history: *El despertar social in 2019*. This collection, curation, and exposition of 130 photographs comprise an activist text that not only conveys a central concept in social development, that of human dignity, but it also shows manifestations of popular culture and social resistance. It highlights not only the moment of friction between the struggling classes, but also the uncomfortable nature these moments can take, as well as the impermanence of the texts as they exist before, during, and after such a moment. This digital project calls attention to important elements as a cultural production: It raises the consciousness of community building with a cultural process that is not commodified; it also posits the still prevalent view of the understanding of culture as civilized versus the protestors as violent, particularly with the ensuing comments in the media; it presents common folk as artists and celebrates the art of protest and dissent as aesthetic, while at the same time positioning the artist's and the viewers' gaze as contributors to the process. This analysis will show how digital documentation formalizes

this cultural production as protest and historic record that foments community building. It celebrates the people's ingenuity and artistry and validates their struggles and protests. The project posits the need to speak the language of humanity which is accepting each experience as a work of art. At the same time, it underscores the aesthetic of citizen resistance that is transformed from a lack of dignity to an empowering role of citizenship. *Ciudad como texto* thus serves as *materia prima* for educational, artistic and cultural research.

The definition of culture has undergone a much-needed (r)evolution. Indeed, the colonial perception of having culture or being cultured was one of civilizing, oftentimes brutally and at the economic, physical, and social expense of those considered "wild." And, yet this vision somewhat remains. If we consider culture as a general process of intellectual and aesthetic development, popular culture matters because it mobilizes the masses. Yet, the consumption of cultural products through the capitalist culture industries maintains the essential relation of cultural power. To break the cycle, we must engage in the on-going process of production, circulation, and consumption. The focus of cultural analysis then shifts from evaluating and selecting works to fit into juried exhibitions, to becoming far more receptive to dissecting cultural meaning from the quotidian and noting how texts might be used as resources for understanding our complex and multi-layered world.

### **Consciousness of community building**

The "despertar social" (social awakening) takes place on October 2019. It is described as the culmination of the political "mega crisis", as termed by Gastón Soublette, the beloved Chilean philosopher, poet,



writer, composer, musicologist, and teacher. A woke Chile is reminiscent of the atrocities that fueled the anger and desire to protest against the blatant human rights violations of the Pinochet dictatorship. Chile has a history of using art to convey to the public the nature of a movement's ethos and *modus operandi*. Protests in Chile have had a strong ethos of solidarity, citizens believed in helping each other, and they understood the difference between solidarity, completion, and individualism. This mutual support is reminiscent of how the *arpilleras* effectively communicated their dissent during the Pinochet era, many of which made reference to family and unity. They produced bright colored embroidered textiles that portrayed scenes of their communities that showed the world the lack of jobs, hunger, political repression, and denounced the oppression in the shantytowns that depicted children and family problems (Doughty 2019). These movements - as civic engagements that involved hundreds of social organizations that operated in an underground fashion in retort to the dictatorship (Power 2009), such as the "Vicaria de la solidaridad." In addition to providing basic needs, they contributed to setting up the *arpillera* workshops to empower shantytown women to earn a living (Adams 2002). The 200 *arpillera* workshops in Santiago were considered subversive, the meetings and *arpillera* textiles were kept as covert actions, the manufacturing and exportation were clandestine, the women met in private, and these textiles were exported via confidential contacts at the airports. Research shows that the consumers of these products were non-governmental organizations, human rights groups, and expat Chileans in Europe and the US; some of these buyers collected them and made exhibitions, took them on tour to schools and human rights campaigns. In this way, art was used to

export the untold stories across the globe while also exposing the false claims that Pinochet was bringing order to Chile.

In a similar fashion in 1979 muralist group Brigada Ramona Parra (BRP)—named after Ramona Parra, a young woman who died in 1940 during a demonstration in Santiago—their goal was to protest the dictatorship by painting murals in Santiago (Adams 2002). Pinochet's siege saw the erasure of leftists' film, music, literature, and art, which included the whitewashing of BRP murals that for five years were colorfully decorating the walls of Santiago. In 1987, the BRP resurfaced again, seeking to appease all Chileans, ensuring that the “No” campaign was strengthened and legitimized as more than a quest for freedom; they advocated the need for recognition of a riotous past that had all but been erased by the regime. While many of the murals were whitewashed soon after their creation, the consistency with which they appeared ensured that voices that had been silenced for fifteen years were now being heard. The color, iconography, and powerful images of the works displayed compelled the viewer to engage with the ideas presented. These murals acted as visual reference of what it could be (Doughty 2019).

In both cases, art was used to hear those who didn't have a voice, to see those who were hidden. Art for Chileans has served as a powerful emancipatory force, challenging dominant institutions, and reinforcing the subversion of existing systems. These activist works shaped ideas about leadership, solidarity, bravery, humanity, dangers, torture and death, authority, and fantasies of a better future. Art helped mobilize protests, helped recruit individuals into protest movements, and provided encouraging emotional messages that tap into the spirituality of future activists and supporters (Adams 2002).

Common folk as activists

The *estallido* of 2019 is essentially not simply a political explosion but also an artistic one where everyone and anyone takes to the streets to visually voice their dissent. The *estallido* also represents an outbreak, explosion and eruption of art. Carola Ureta Marín provides a digital catalog and exposition of some of the graffitied walls of Santiago. While Terri Gordon-Zolov and Eric Zolov produce a nuanced analysis and provide historical context in their beautiful book *Chile Despierto: The Walls of Santiago Social Revolution and Political Aesthetics in Contemporary Chile* (2022).<sup>1</sup> They describe the city as a transformed outdoor museum of sorts and Gordon-Zolov and Zolov do a fantastic job of delineating the political historical ramifications of the protest that inspires this outflow of creative outrage. Both projects are important in establishing historical memory. They document posters of lost and killed citizens, graffiti that insinuates the 2019 politics to that of the Pinochet era and resonates how the current *estallido* is an overwhelming cry for social justice that has been in the making for the past 30 years, the end of the Pinochet regime that left not only unhealed scars but an ingrained culture of impunity. The overwhelming protest was a cry for dignity, the citizen's demands culminated in the fight for *dignidad* (dignity) demanding rights and basic freedoms such as guarantees for health care, education, housing and pensions. Every citizen was involved in the debate and appropriated the space of the city as a canvas of dissent.

Artist Carola Ureta Marín produced *Ciudad como texto* documenting the local Chilean voices as the tangible application of social mobilization and popular resistance. While Ureta Marín serves

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<sup>1</sup> These authors also include an interactive map of the featured artwork in their book, available at: <https://berghahnbooks.com/extras/maps/Gordon-ZolovWalls/>. Accessed 19 March 2024.

as the activist (artist-activist) the project also includes Daniel Corvillón as photographer and Felipe Solugeren as web designer. Additionally, this was a collaboration of more than 60 individuals in the nine months that the project took to develop before its launch in August 2020. The digital project was funded by Delight Lab, Galería CIMA, and it is in its second print edition by Ediciones Museo del Estallido.

Essentially, the protestors as well as Ureta Marín with her photographs, website and books are activists (artists-activists), they are storytellers expressing their lived experiences through mediums everyone has access to. As Rachel Presley puts it, “activism represents the public struggle between the lived and imagined, between the aesthetic representations of what is and the aesthetic imaginations of what could be” (Presley 2020). Activism creates an instant link between spaces of human emotion and spaces of human experience. While most of the protestors did not necessarily see themselves as creating art but rather simply voicing their concerns, the result is a robust lens to evaluate alternative ways to affect social change, *el despertar*, is a cultural awakening as a social movement in and of itself, while at the same time mobilizing other movements. Gordon-Zolov and Zolov note some of the most salient revolutionary currents that emerged including the “evade” alluding to the mass evasion of the metro fare on October 18, 2019; the graffiti also emphasized a dire need for feminism in this upheaval; an indigenous liberation of the Mapuche; and the trope of the Chile *despierto* (woke Chile). Great efforts have been made to preserve the historical memory of these visual (and some performative) protests, by conceiving these as activist pieces as well we recognize their unique position in fostering educational awareness and enabling change. Art is inherently personal, thus political. Activism takes it further by actively protesting and

creating spaces of human emotion and spaces of/for desire for change. Consequentially, the role of activism in advocating for human rights and social justice is deeply rooted in decoloniality and the goal of dismantling the colonial power structures. The cultural awakening seen in the streets of Santiago underscores the pressing need to explore alternate and intersectional modes of resistance.

This project is particularly salient because it documents the local imaginary that is non-linear and collectively constructed. Documentation of these visual protests are essential given the move of the Chilean government to silence them. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic citizens were obliged to stay home and it was this time that the government ordered the cleaning and erasure of the messages, effectively to “barrer y limpiar esta contaminación visual” (sweep and clean this visual contamination). The rest of the issues seemed to be ignored and the President was cited making comments to the media that they were “at war with a violent enemy” (Bunyan 2019). Indeed, the streets act as a stage for the protests but also as a meeting space to entertain conversation forums, dances, barricades and commercial trenches, as Marin notes a space for free for all (“multi-todo al cubo”). All of these constitute the codes of signification used by the government, the popular, and news media in juxtaposition to the codes used by the popular masses.

### **Community-building and solidarity**

*La ciudad como texto* is an example of how culture is formed from solidarity among a defined group of people facing a particular struggle at a specific point in time. It highlights not only the moment of friction between the struggling classes, but also the uncomfortable nature these

moments can take, as well as the impermanence of the texts as they exist before, during, and after such a moment. This is characterized by the double entendre of some of the posts: “Quemaría esta ciudad entera para verte sonreír” (I would burn this entire city to see you smile) is reminiscent of poetic interludes but in this graffiti, context speaks volumes about the exhaustion of the protestors and discontent with the government that is making them feel powerless and unable to obtain the justice they deserve. Indeed, the poetry is in the streets as one of the graffiti reads “La poesía está en la klle [sic]” as cultural icons are formed from the solidarity of dissent. Statements like this reflect a deeper love, a sense of loss and sadness. Which if applied to other graffiti and street art messages could mean, justice or an actual person. Much of the phrases written were positive and reinforced the idea that as a community they could overcome this situation. Graffiti was a way to express their dissent without the media’s influence which may at times not side with the community. These expressions also reflect the generational knowledge of many symbols, culturally latent sayings, proverbs and icons that are integral to the culture of several generations. The messages expressed the distrust in the news media and their message to the people, positing that the internet and mass media were at points ignoring, hiding, or misrepresenting the truth from the perspective of the community.

### **The viewers’ gaze contributes to the process**

As we traverse the digitized route, our narrative is formed individually as we take a virtual stroll through Plaza de la Dignidad to a path to centralized power, the Plaza de la Ciudadanía. Both Utera Marín’s digital photographic exhibition and Gordon-Zolov and Zolov’s book project do a wonderful job of showcasing the protest art, the poetry,

and the many ramifications of the revolutionary currents and the politics. I am particularly interested in positing that this documentation is vital not only for historical purposes but also to further understand social transformations and the impact of cultural productions. *Ciudad como texto* has already served as a resource in university research and two book editions have been published by LOM Ediciones.<sup>2</sup>

One approach would be to study the semantics of architecture and people's relationship to these buildings as fountains of cultural meaning and history. This protest gives us insight into how Chilean citizens saw the buildings, walls and statues they defaced as having functions not only for their intended purpose, aesthetic or functionality. These contained accumulated representations of a semantic discourse with references to the principal cultural values of a society. The defacement of the buildings clearly established that society needs to express the quality of social life that envelops these structures. The architecture already has embedded signs that establish those values that are recognized and appreciated by society, and the semantic reality is in constant transformation and change. The protesters in effect redefined the social values that culturally identified these edifices. This numbing of past signification was made very evident as the protestors were able to deduce the presence of architectonic metaphors. A repurposing of buildings certainly makes semantic reading of the city ambiguous as architects prefer to interpret and recodify those signs with contemporary cultural values. In this cultural

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<sup>2</sup> The website of LCCT is currently housed at: [Http://laciudadcomotexto.cl](http://laciudadcomotexto.cl) (Accessed 24 March 2024) and at the Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/lcct-2ed-2021/page/n127/mode/2up> (Accessed 24 March 2024).

explosion, it is the citizens that construct and invent their own meaning of that which they don't agree with.

What we observe in these artistic acts of dissent is *praxeology*, the inquiry into how norms are interpreted, realized, and enacted under particular social and historical circumstances. We see almost a subconscious and automatic questioning of how Chileans decided where and what to post, tag or in some instances perform: They challenged the architectonic narrative of the city that was embedded with past political oppression dating back to colonialism. The graffiti reflects a conscious recognition of a continuous discourse that is highly codified. Additionally, the graffiti engages with a coherent discourse rich in figures and questions the saturation of random and ambiguous outdated rhetorical figures. In other words, the flyers, paintings, tags, photographs, etc. were all strategically placed to address the embedded meaning that the edifice had and to effectively contest that meaning and change it. This form of praxis is a valuable tool to promote transformations that could lead to new forms of democracy. In Santiago, these testimonies of social discontent were effective because the people understood the importance of reinventing cultural meaning in their city. For example, the names of the subway station signs were changed to reimagine the nation: Los Heroes became Evasión, “a variation of the protest phrase evade” (Gordon-Zolov 2023). To effect similar changes elsewhere one might need to first question: What sort of practical knowledge is needed to make this possible and how might this knowledge be established in institutionalized forms of democratic inquiry? What are the possibilities and opportunities for democracy at a higher level of aggregation that globalization makes possible? How might the public sphere be reinvented at the global level?



Culture is an ongoing process with an impermanent understanding or definition that at times undergoes a much-needed revolution. Transformations can take place from civilizing of the “wild”—as the Chilean government insinuated in its reaction to purge and clean the walls of Santiago—to a culture that resides with the people. The study of the city as a “text” where culture is intertwined with polity and politics, where every culture has a power structure and those in power create the rules and regulations that the culture follows has been a focus of study by cultural theorists from Walter Benjamin to Stuart Hall, to Nestor García Canclini in Mexico, and Bruno Latour’s focus on culture as perspectival and relational. The culture as class struggle as presented in this scenario demonstrates their cultivation of resistance in the face of the government’s oppression. It highlights not only the moment of rupture or friction between the struggling classes, but also the impermanence of the cultures as they exist prior to, during, and after such a moment. It is powerful in its ambiguity and anonymity given that the city graffiti is not produced for economic consumption but rather it exists outside the cultural industry and therefore has the freedom to examine questions of social mobilization and popular forces against hegemonic spheres of power.

Popular culture is in this constant flux of “resistance and acceptance” (Hall 2002), in that vein Chileans took to the streets, social media, and any platform that would allow them to express their resistance to reach a wide audience no matter their socioeconomic class. Social media sprouted with citizens photographing and posting as much as they could on Instagram and Facebook with the following hashtags: #lamemorianoseborra, #laciudadcomotexto, #noseborra, #chiledespierto. *La ciudad como texto* extends the possibility to engage that global sphere. The walls of Santiago awoke not only its

citizens but also because of individual posts on social media, transnational communities were formed with sympathizers and allies. Because this was an activist explosion by the people for the people, it captured the voices of those most affected and enraged with the current situation.

Unlike traditional art produced by artists or even activists, this photographic exhibition does not require the interpretation of semantic codes for Chilean citizens. The power of these activist expressions thus is that the codes were already ready for reinventing and reimagining. Citizens used historical references without naming them, and reconfigured semantic value to existing cultural icons. The targeted audience was aware of the double meanings and the implied criticisms. The reflection needed for interpretation was already embedded in Chilean society. There is a difference between civic engagement with art, linkages between art and social development or artists who engage the public as co-creators with the protest graffiti here viewed as activist works. The latter requires a nuanced interpretation by its audience because the art itself is codified in such a way that prior knowledge of its inspiration is required. As an example, Pedro Reyes' exhibition of *Palas por pistolas (Guns for Shovels)* promotes social engagement by asking the public "through TV spots inspired by soap operas" to surrender 1,527 weapons in Mexico. Reyes then brokered an agreement with the Mexican army to have these melted and transformed them into shovels that then served to plant as many trees (Sommer 2014). Reyes's artistic idea is activist in that he aims to enact social transformation and engagement. This project is substantially more complex than the graffiti on the walls of Santiago, and it requires an explanation of the motivation, the process, and the desired interpretation of civic engagement. The artist critically

examines society, determines the needed societal change, and presents his critique or solution in his art to engage his audience to effect change. By contrast, *La ciudad como texto* embraces the idea of the personal as inherently political—it is perhaps the ultimate expression of the political. That is why the digital exhibition of *La ciudad como texto* is so important to preserve. It is an activist project that exemplifies the utmost expression of human activity. We need art to combat systems of oppression, and we do so by acting within the cultural politics of activism that create that call for a conscientious engagement in the (r)evolution of our communities.

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## **2      Resistance Stance in Nigerian Digital Space**

### **A Critical Stylistic Appraisal of Discourse Issues in Oduduwa Nation Secessionist Narrative in Nairaland**

*Richard Damilare Akano*

Resistance is a reaction to an unfavourable situation or status quo. Individuals who believe that there is an immediate need for change, whether that change is gradual, rapid, or spontaneous, are more likely to exhibit resistance. Over the years, media—both traditional and new media—has been a veritable platform for sponsoring, peddling and sustaining resistance ideologies. Digital media and technological advancements have created platforms for knowledge sharing, debates and contestations and have also enabled seamless and swift conveyance of information to target audiences within seconds, thus making activism easier (Mutsvairo, 2016). According to Shirky (2011), social media is being used nearly universally to organise political protests and other global movements. People who live in linked communities today have greater access to information, more chances for group action, and an increasing freedom to call for change. The early period of the 2010s was remarkably marked by the revolutions targeted at oppression, political manipulations, a poor standard of

living, and other humanitarian debacles in North Africa and the Middle East.

The collective resolve of protesters to oust this socio-political malaise birthed a series of protests, uprisings and armed conflicts, first in Tunisia before spreading to other Arab nations, a movement dubbed „the Arab Spring” (Chiluwa, 2015). Apparently, the strategic role played by the digital media in the Arab Spring movement paved the way for the revolutionisation of social activism in Africa (Chiluwa, 2015). Since the Arab Spring, social activism in Africa has been on the rise. Attesting to this, Opeibi (2016) notes that Nigeria, for instance, recorded a rise in web-based conversations and social interactions through online platforms from about 2% to about 68% between 2001 and 2014, a strong testament to the increase in access to the Internet and data services in Nigeria. This, however, laid the foundation for civic engagement and participation in socio-political movements via social media and other digital platforms, as evident in the conduct of social protests (#OccupyNigeria, #EndSars), resistant movements (the Niger-Delta crisis, Boko Haram insurgency), secessionist movements (Biafra nation agitation), advocacy movements (#BBOG), among others.

The Oduduwa Nation Movement (also called Yoruba Nation or Oodua Republic) is a self-determination and secessionist mandate that aims at achieving political and geo-territorial independence for the Yoruba tribe, who are residents of southwestern states in Nigeria. This struggle for self-determination is anchored on the historical antecedents of the various nationalistic movements that sprung up in the western region following Nigeria’s political independence in 1960. The creation of *Egbe Omo Oodua* in 1949, *Afenfere* in 1966, and the *Oodua People’s Congress* (OPC) in 1993 were nationalistic movements

in the southwestern region that took cultural, political and military dimensions. At the height of these nationalistic movements, the notion of „Oodua nation” was birthed following various political upsets, recurring military coups and counter-coups, and an increasing Biafra nation secessionist movement (Ajala, 2009). This is why the history of secessionist campaigns in Nigeria can be traced to the Nigerian Civil War (also called the Biafra War) of 1967–1970. Just as the Biafra nation secessionist mandate has been piloted and sustained so far by groups such as Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and, in recent times, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the Oduduwa nation secessionist movement has equally been steered by groups such as *Ilana Omo Oodua*, Yoruba World Congress (YWC), Disciples of Oodua Republic, and Yoruba One Voice (YOV), while also charting the path of media awareness with the activities of Omo Oduduwa Radio, Oduduwa-Voice Radio Station, and Oduduwa Grand Alliance Radio (Aminu & Chiluwa, 2022). A Professor of History and leader of *Ilana Omo Oodua* pan-Yoruba group, Prof. Banji Akintoye, is known to have been a frontline leader and vanguard of the secessionist campaign. Similarly, Sunday Adeniyi Adeyemo, also known as Sunday Igboho, the leader of the separatist group, has been charged with employing hate speech, stirring up violence with inflammatory statements, aggravating racial animosity, and amassing illegal weapons (Akinrefon, 2021).

### **Review of related studies and research gap**

The literature is expanding in inquiries into resistance movements and secessionist narratives in Nigeria in different humanistic endeavours (Buhari, 2018; Unya & Omaka, 2021; Sunday et al., 2021). Significant efforts have gone into linguistics-based research on resistance

movement discourse in foreign nations (Juarez-Mira, 2018; Alrefaee, Abdul-Ghafour, & Alazzany et al., 2019) and within Nigeria, such as the Niger-Delta militancy (Chiluwa, 2011; Aghedo, 2012; Ononye, 2017), Biafra nation agitation (Ajiboye, 2017; Chiluwa, 2018; Abioye & Ajiboye, 2019; Kamalu & Atoma, 2019; Ajiboye, 2020; Osisanwo & Iyoha, 2020; Igwebuiké and Akoh, 2022, 2023), Arewa republic (Auwal, 2018) and Yoruba or Oduduwa nation agitation (Aminu & Chiluwa, 2022; Osisanwo & Akano, 2023). Chiluwa (2018) provides new insights into the complexities of the Nigeria-Biafra conflicts and demonstrates how it's feasible for social movements to actively support discourses that could undermine or even negate their own goals. The study comes to the conclusion that Biafra is a nation divided against itself and that its people are incapable of creating the separate nation they long for. This conclusion is supported by the pragmatic consequences of discourses that reflect competing and conflicting ideas and by the diverse ideological perspectives held by group members. Igwebuiké and Akoh (2022) prod into self-legitimation and other-delegitimation strategies in IPOB's supreme leader, Nnamdi Kanu's online radio broadcasts. The study uncovers how Kanu used justification, moralisation, and rationalisation to support his abrupt flight from Nigeria, demand Biafra's self-rule, and call for a boycott of elections as well as to refute claims of the president's cloning, electoral fraud, marginalisation of the Igbo, corruption, and brutality among security personnel. Self-glorification, pronominalisations, polarisation, pejorative nomination (labelling), and hyperbolic expressions are some of the linguistic manifestations of these discursive structures that Kanu deploys to frame the IPOB movement as a just cause.



Furthermore, Aminu and Chilwa (2022) examine how identity and resistance are re-invented in Facebook protest posts on the Oduduwa secessionist narrative. The study finds that the radical movement's online discourses accurately reflect their total separatist ideology and commitment to their self-actualisation struggle, in addition to explaining the function of protest discourse in the group's agitations for a separate state. The study further demonstrates that, as a marginalised community, the Oduduwa separatist movement strongly articulates its cultural ideology. It shows how online posters evince a negative attitude towards netizens who oppose the mandate through socio-cognitive models and a positive attitude towards those who express their solidarity. In the same vein, Osisanwo and Akano (2023) undertake a study on the various discursive constructions of the Yoruba nation agitation in some Nigerian digital communities. Using Martin and White's appraisal theory and socio-semantic model of critical discourse analysis, the study discovers that labelling, negative comparison, appeal to emotions, expressions of hatred, and flaming are frequently used to portray Oduduwa agitators as terrorists, cowards, and advocates of violence, while others positively portray the agitators as organised strategists. Also, some participants view the secessionist mandate as a danger to the nation's sovereignty and unity, while others see it as an opportunity for people to break free from oppression. Despite these scholarly attempts, the Oduduwa nation secessionist movement still appears to be inadequately explored and scantily researched, especially within linguistic and discourse studies. Unlike what previous studies did not explicitly do, this study, therefore, seeks to uncover, bring to the fore, and critically examine some advancing discourse issues that inform the online engagement of the

Oduduwa Nation secessionist campaign as online participants advance their resistant ideology through critical stylistic choices.

### **Materials and method**

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach and a top-down analytical model for content analysis and interpretation of the data. Data for this study consisted of Oduduwa or Yoruba nation-related posts and comments that were generated as discursive threads on Nairaland, a popular Nigerian virtual platform. Nairaland is a well-known cyberspace that boasts over 2.9 million registered users, in addition to a large number of people that are not registered and are labelled as guests.” These registered users are Nigerians at home and in the diaspora. The platform was selected because of its high level of user engagement, its popularity among the general public, the diversity of its users’ backgrounds, and its emphasis on ease of use. The digital platform was also selected because of the great degree to which its members engage in conversations about national issues and topics spanning religion, politics, education, and everyday life. Oduduwa nation posts made between September 2020 and September 2021 were manually culled from Nairaland and subjected to thematic and critical stylistic analyses. This period was marked by massive social media awareness about Oduduwa nation rallies that were staged within this timeframe in different southwest states. Most of the posts, culled in their crude and unadulterated forms, were rendered in non-standard English forms of spelling, abbreviations, tense use and grammatical construction. Out of over a thousand posts generated in this platform, eighteen (18) posts that synchronised with the study’s objectives were purposively sampled as representative texts for analysis. The posts were labelled P1–P18 for ease of reference.

The theoretical and analytical framework of Jeffries' (2010) critical stylistics was used to support the inductive analysis of thematic issues drawn from the data. Critical Stylistics stems from the theoretical orientations of Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis. It is an emerging paradigm that strives to equip language analysts with critical thinking and interpretative abilities that empower them to look beyond the grammatically obvious and to unearth ingrained and underlying ideologies in texts (Jeffries, 2010). Critical Stylistics connects stylistics with critical discourse analysis to serve as a framework that uncovers ideologies enacted consciously or unconsciously in texts and how power relations are textually crafted. Jeffries put forward some critical stylistic tools that can be deployed to interrogate texts: naming and describing, representing actors/events/states, equating and contrasting, exemplifying and enumerating, prioritising, implying and assuring, hypothesising, negating, presenting the speech and thoughts of other participants, and representing time, space and society (Jeffries, 2010).

### **Analysis and discussion**

In this section, attention is given to how some critical stylistic devices are deployed to explain advanced discourse and social issues that surround the discursive engagement of the Oduduwa nation secessionist narrative.

### **Aggravating Insecurity and Violence in Nigeria**

The rising index of insecurity in Nigeria has consistently served as a bane to national cohesion, growth and development at the political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental fronts. In the past seventeen years, there has been a sporadic increase in the statistics of

insecurity in Nigeria. The Boko Haram terrorism, ethno-religious tensions, kidnapping, cybercrime, ritual killings, banditry, the farmers-herdsmen crises, religious fundamentalism and intolerance, community confrontations, and electoral violence, among others, are some of the defiant manifestations of insecurity Nigeria has had to battle with over the years. As protection of the lives and properties of the citizenry stands to be the primary function and most fundamental duty of the government, this has not satisfactorily materialised within Nigeria's security system. The Oduduwa nation agitation is particularly spurred by the uncontrolled and indiscriminate ethnic killings of Yoruba dwellers in the southwest by supposed herdsmen (Aladekomo, 2021). However, the call for secession is grounded in the general realities of insecurity in the country.

**P1:** Say no to the slave contraption called Nigeria. Nigeria at 60 yet no progress but same problems of 1970's, retrogression and 2nd recolonization by the Fulani and massive ethnic cleansing of Indigenous land owners by herdsmen, boko haram and other Islamic mercenaries.... Oodua nation is coming and Muric has failed in his assignment to divide Yoruba across religious line **(Nairaland, September 23, 2020).**

**P2:** Buhari divided this country with his nepotism and ethnic agenda. You feign ignorance while your kinsmen masquerading as herdsmen kill Nigerians. And to make matter worst, the security apparatus of the

country which is under you were also blind to this atrocities. We are not all fool the Nigerian govt thought we are. We won't die in silence.

**(Nairaland, October 1, 2020)**

**P3:** As long as this shit hole called Nigeria is concerned, the only lawful groups are; herdsmen, bandits from the North and Boko Haram. Aside the groups listed any other group should be treated in the language they understand; one Nigeria will kill whoever is busy supporting it at the expense of lives of innocent people the so called unity is taking.

**(Nairaland, June 15, 2021)**

The call for secession is backed by both discourse participants from the Yoruba tribe and those from other ethnic groups. P1–P4 above express lamentation over the depleting security system and the alleged nepotistic disposition of the Nigerian government towards it. P1 resorts to the *negating* strategy „no progress” to express pessimism and disappointment while also submitting that despite the attainment of the Diamond Jubilee, insecurity has only brought retrogression to Nigeria as it was in the ‘70’s. The consequence of such retrogression is constructed with the *naming* stylistic strategy „slave contraption” a nominal group that instantiates negative labelling of Nigeria’s nationhood. The *representing actor* strategy is instantiated in P2 as the actor „Buhari”, Nigeria’s former president, is represented as an anarchist who initiates the material process „divided”, hence, aggravating the prevalent insecurity in the country through ethnic

bigotry. As further claimed in P2, the government „feigns ignorance” of the onslaughts carried out on innocent Nigerian citizens by the herdsmen. The stylistic device of *assuming and implying* is deployed by the poster, as this is expected to trigger an implicature in the minds of other online participants that Buhari has been largely pretentious about his reactionary measures that usually followed incidents of killings, arson, displacement of locales, and other violent acts perpetrated in southwestern states. The security apparatuses are called out for negligence in the effective dispatch of obligations. It is further affirmed that how the government has chosen to address the operations of „Islamic mercenaries” and „Boko Haram”, has ethnic undertones. The nepotistic stance and sense of judgement of the federal government, as perceived by interactants, strongly implies endangerment of the attacked ethnic group, especially since the evil-perpetrating herdsmen are adjudged to be Fulani, and, invariably, kinsmen of the Nigerian president. Taking to the *enumerating* strategy, P3 ironically identifies „herdsmen, bandits from the north and Boko Haram” as the only lawful groups in Nigeria. In essence, they have constituted a menace and have continued to frustrate Nigeria’s unity. The poster enumerates these groups to otherise and dissociate them from the peace-loving south. On this basis, secession is assumed to be the right call to end every form of ethnic tension.

**P4:** Igboho incited people to protest about the killings in his region and also organised rallies when the federal government refused to act towards insecurity ravaging the country through his kinsmen. He was in his house when the federal government sent battalions of

soldiers to his house to kill and maim at midnight. Hold on, what are you talking about? Also, they planted weapons and claimed they were taken from Igboho's residence. It's better for him to stay away for now in order to make up a new strategy.

**(Nairaland, July16, 2021)**

**P5:** You can go and kill them. You sit down in your comfort zone and people are dying in the hand of herdsmen, bandits and boko haram. I pray one of ur family will experience being kidnap or kill by bandit. **(Nairaland, July 3, 2021)**

**P6:** The Yoruba never agitated for marginalization. It's start with the Fulani invasion and the attack on farmers as the security agent turn a blind eye. Beside the security services as at today is been dominated **(Nairaland, July 3, 2021)**

The Yoruba nation agitation was fueled by herdsmen's attacks and gruesome murder of Yoruba indigenes on their ancestral farmland and hamlets, even as the former set ablaze humans and properties under the guise of self-defence and a show of aggression (Nwanike, 2022). The poster of P6 unequivocally states that the recurrence of these heinous attacks and the security agents' response of „turning a blind eye” to the disastrous events further widen the existing ethnic divide and tension between the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba people. Instead of tackling the unabating insecurity Nigeria is embattled with,

the government is consumed with the ambition of taming the Oduduwa secessionist agitation, which spurred the set-up of Sunday Igboho, a frontline leader of the agitation, in order to accuse him, within the legal premise, of stockpiling arms. The government is alleged to have „planted weapons” in Igboho’s residence (P4 refers to Igboho with the referent „he”). In P5, the participant lets out an outburst over the indifference the Nigerian government has shown concerning the Fulani herders’ attack on local dwellers, and the government’s show of military force to cripple the Oduduwa secessionist campaign. Hence, P5 maintains that Igboho was right to have „incited people to protest about the killings in his region” and also spearheaded the expulsion of the Northern nomadic herdsmen from Yoruba territories. In light of the foregoing, online participants appear to provide the ravaging insecurity as justification for the Oduduwa nation secessionist campaign.

### **The Amalgamation Pact of 1914**

Nigeria’s colonial history plays a major role in the Oduduwa nation secessionist narrative. Nigeria became a sovereign nation after the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 by Frederick Lord Lugard. Following this exercise, the historical occurrences of ethnic politics and the quest for regional representation at the centre foretold the ethnicity-motivated politics that were to bedevil the Nigerian political system. Gliding on shared knowledge of the historical antecedent of Nigeria, commenters express negativity towards the amalgamation of 1914 and a desirable dismemberment of what P1 labelled „slave contraption”. The stance of these discourse participants aligns with Ugwuoke et al.’s (2020) perception of the 1914 amalgamation pact as a forced and fraudulent union.



**P7:** You might not be alive to see it happened. Were the people one before the British amalgamated them in 1914? Only 28 people signed it. 22 British and 6 people from what is called Nigeria today. This 6 were Hausas-Fulanis and Yoruba. None from Igbos and all other tribes in Nigeria. **(Nairaland, May 22, 2022)**

**P8:** All what I know is that this bloody Fulani govt will soon set the country on fire. Self determination is a right of every nationality anywhere in the world. For we shall know the truth and the truth shall set us free. The end of Nigeria is knocking at the door and is fast approaching. Why are the northerners always afraid of breaking up from this good for nothing country? Nigeria is not one and it can never be one. One Nigeria is a monumental scam. The fulanis are born jihadist and we dnt share the same culture, beliefs, religion, orientation, education, exposure and upbringing. The 1914 Almagamation was a disaster that befell the country and the end shall justify the means. **(Nairaland, May 23, 2021)**

**P9:** already this contraption animal forest called nigeria will not past 2023 na...its we that will divide this lord luggard

experimentation..... **(Nairaland, June 22, 2021)**

**P10:** Nigeria was patched together in 1914 and will be divided whether you like it or not. In a few years, you will require a visa to come ride okada in Lagos. **(Nairaland, July 3, 2021)**

The text producers of P7–P10 conceive the 1914 amalgamation as a woe that befell the Yoruba nation and other marginalised regions. P8 registers discontent and disgust at the exclusion of the „Igbos and other tribes in Nigeria” from the signatories of the amalgamation. This alone speaks volumes about the unequal ethnic representation and the unsolicited and forceful joining of these tribes with the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba tribes. These are pointers to the causes of the Nigerian civil war of 1966 as the first call for secession, and the intensifying efforts towards the creation of the Biafra republic through the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in recent times. P8 and P9 glean from the *naming* strategy to construct Nigeria as a „monumental scam” and „contraption animal forest” which, again, is an instance of valence and a negative representation of Nigeria and the amalgamation pact as a fraudulent arrangement. To enforce this stance, P8 takes to *describing* strategy to construe the 1914 amalgamation with the predicative adjective „disaster”. This description is premised on the notion that northern Nigeria’s association with the Jihadist movement is essentially a domineering culture that is predisposed to subjecting all other tribes and ethnic groups to the religious reign of Jihadism. Based on the relayed orientation about the religious and political dominance of northern Nigeria, which is backed up by Nigeria’s former

President, the participant sticks to the *negating* strategy to declare that „Nigeria is not one and it can never be one”.

Furthermore, P10 also holds the view that the 1914 incident was an unfavourable arrangement. *Prioritising* is indexed in P10 as the text producer achieves this through passivisation form of information structure, which is strategic to placing Nigeria as a subject that suffers the tragedy of „was patched”. Through passivisation, „Nigeria” as a recipient of an action is brought to the fore as a victim of circumstance. Therefore, the text producer attempts to invoke empathy in other online participants, such that they would subscribe to this notion of a victimised Nigeria. Consequently, in P9 and P10, the *hypothesising* stylistic device is then indexed with the use of epistemic modal items „will” to express a sense of certainty and high possibility that „Nigeria will not past 2023...” and that „Nigeria will be divided...”. Against this background, the conception of the 1914 amalgamation as a failed and prejudiced arrangement serves as a fillip behind the secessionist agitations of IPOB and the *Ilana Omo Oodua*.

### **Perceived Marginalization of Southern Nigeria**

The call for secession is also informed by the perceived marginalization of the southern region of Nigeria, inhabited by the Yoruba and Igbo ethnic majorities as well as other minority tribes. Prior to the boisterous demonstrations for secession of the south, the restructuring mandate has been a strategic measure and narrative suggested to mitigate ethnic tensions, enhance equitable allocation and maximization of resources, and clamp down insecurity in different regions (Obiorah & Okoye, 2020). For instance, the Niger-Delta crisis dwells mainly on the federal government’s control of oil wealth and the oil region, poor infrastructure and environmental hazards ravaging the

oil region. Consequently, this has resulted in high level of militancy, violence and protestations in the region. While the Niger-Delta group have had their fair share of marginalization, the Oduduwa nation group capitalizes on this to demand the secession of the Yoruba people.

**P11:** This Fulani terrorists government is doing everything possible to turn the entire south to a conquered territory and slave camp. They support the terrorists to be killing innocent southerners but clamp down on freedom fighters trying to defend their people in the south **(Nairaland, October 1, 2020)**

**P12:** You are entitled to your opinion sir but it is what we want. Nigeria based on its multilingual nature will always be difficult to manage not to talk of when there is corruption and lack of trusts among the cultural entities that constitute the country. Every region especially the southern ones are being constrained in this unproductive union, let everyone go their separate ways, I am sure this will lead to maximization of potentials. **(Nairaland, October 3, 2021)**

**P13:** A movement that encompasses the South west, south east, south south and the middle belt will achieve a faster recognition from the UN and other foreign countries apart from Britain. The tempo should be sustained to show that the balkanization of

Nigeria is a felt need of the peoples of what is now called Nigeria. The Ipobs part of the coalition should be kept under watch so that they do not exhibit their typical character. Oduduwa republic, time is now.  
**(Nairaland, September 15, 2021)**

**P14:** It's not just about marginalisation  
The Yorubas have realised they do not need to be in the same country with blood thirsty cannibals **(Nairaland, October 1, 2020)**

The witch-hunting of freedom fighters and peaceful protesters within the southern states, which should have been directed towards terrorist groups and religious fundamentalists in the northern states, is explained as a testament to marginalization and regional enslavement. To systematically execute what P13 refers to as „the balkanization of Nigeria”, a coalition of the southern states in the south-west, south-east, south-south and middle belt is proposed, such that it will attract foreign intervention from international bodies like the United Nations and from world powers such as Britain and the US. „The maximisation of potentials”, which the text producer advances through *hypothesising* and verbal elements „will lead”, can then be achieved following the divorce of the South from the North. In advancing this stance, naming strategy is instantiated with the use of the nominal group „blood-thirsty cannibals” (P14) to describe the northern part of Nigeria. *Naming* is further used to derogatorily label and negatively represent Nigeria’s nationhood as an „unproductive union” (P11) and the nation as a „conquered territory and slave camp” (P12) that was run by a „Fulani terrorist government” (P11). The text

producers imply that the state of insecurity is bound to grow worse given that the government that is saddled with securing the lives of its citizenry, by implication and assumption, affiliated with terrorism. The text producers use negative labels to amplify the cognitive description of otherization and polarization. In essence, the *equating* stylistic resource is used to conceive an association and coalition of „the south west, south east, south-south and middle belt” as a formidable force that is pitched against the dominant north. On the strength of the above stance, the discourse participants are in full support of the secessionist campaign as a panacea to pacifying the aggrieved south who have, over the years, been victims of ethnic marginalization.

### **The Lingering Biafran Secessionist Movement**

The first attempt at secession in the history of Nigeria’s politics can be traced to the civil war (Biafra War) of 1967–1970. The Nigerian civil war immediately followed the January 15, 1966, military coup and the July 29, 1966, counter-coup in the first republic. The war between the Nigerian government and major parts of the Southeastern region claimed millions of lives through violent conflicts, organised massacres, food shortages, famine, and the destruction of infrastructure and national monuments. However, despite the failed secessionist move, the struggle for the Biafra republic did not dissipate. The re-awakening of the Biafra consciousness, known as the Neo-Biafra movement, is credited to some groups, chief among them the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), who advocate the actualisation of the Biafra republic through non-violent means. A new group, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), emerged and became popular in 2015 to increase the tempo of agitation for the secession of eastern states.

**P15:** People like that half-breed Koiki are moles working to sabotage Yoruba struggle the moment he started making senseless and reckless statements that an attack on IPOB is an attack on the Yorubas, then I knew he was setting them up to fail. Why will any sane person say an attack on violent IPOBs that Wike, Uzodinma and co. are dealing seriously with is an attack on peace loving Yorubas.. such audacity to link a proscribed terrorist group from far away South East to the most progressive race on earth **(Nairaland, August 16, 2021).**

**P16:** we biafrans are happier for this „yoruba nation” rally even more than the yorubas themselves, because this will quicken what we've been looking for **(Nairaland, May 22, 2021)**

**P17:** Who would have believed that Yoruba would one day want Nigeria to break up. The same Yoruba that sided Fulani and MB to sabotage Biafra now wants Oduduwa. To love injustice is so bad. I still am awed with the paradox. Their love for free crude oil seems to have been minified by the blood of their people. So they now know that killing of one's kinsmen is enough reason to agitate for one's own country. But when Igbo were killed in the north, Igbo should not have wanted out of





their weight behind the secessionist campaign while also suggesting a collaboration that can force secession. Conversely, some anti-Oduduwa nation participants such as P18, ruled by ethnic sentiments, express negativity towards the activities and conceive the Oduduwa nation secessionist movement as a „fake movement”, arguing that „Biafrana are those doing the doings”. Additionally, P17 urges other discourse participants to „never take them serious” because „the only self-determination we are aware of is Biafra”. In essence, issues surrounding the Biafra nation movement provide an intertextual base for discourse representations of the Oduduwa nation agitation.

## **Conclusion**

The discourse of secession in Nigeria’s political landscape continues to gather momentum, especially through the instrumentality of digital activism. The Oduduwa nation campaign recently resurged and became a global and local issue that rode on the wings of digital media technology. This study has undertaken a critical stylistic appraisal of some discourse and social issues that surround the discursive engagement and construction of the Oduduwa nation secessionist campaign in Nairaland, a popular Nigerian digital platform. The study identifies aggravating insecurity in the country, the amalgamation pact of 1914, the perceived ethnic oppression of the southern region, and the lingering Biafra nation agitation agenda as social issues that inform the online engagement of the Oduduwa republic movement. These issues are advanced by online participants as justification for the dismemberment of Nigeria and reasons why Nigeria’s nationhood should be terminated. Findings further reveal that online participants deploy critical linguistic-stylistic strategies such as naming and describing, negating, representing actions, equating, hypothesising,

prioritising and enumerating as stylistic devices to project their resistance posture and to air their desire for the actualisation of the secession mandate. These critical stylistic resources are essentially deployed to otherise and dissociate from other Nigerians (either of the Yoruba tribe or other tribes) who do not subscribe to and support the secessionist campaign. These linguistic-stylistic strategies are significantly deployed alongside ideological orientations. On the one hand, they are used in a way that disfavours and delegitimises the otherised northern Nigeria while harping on the sentimental roles played by Nigeria's former president's administration and assumed affinity with the Fulani tribe, who are associated with different forms of socio-political malaise embattling the country.

On the other hand, the strategies favoured and legitimised the activities and ideological beliefs of the Oduduwa nation secessionist crusaders as an opposition group. This is in perfect alignment with Ajiboye's (2020) and Igwebuike and Akoh's (2022) submission that secessionist groups and their online and offline crusaders usually position themselves as non-conformists while also legitimising their oppositional activities against the government and political stakeholders. This is, therefore, reinforced by how online participants enact resistance and their staunch opposition against a united Nigeria. This, again, bolsters Van Dijk's (2009) stance that linguistic and discursive structures can express and project the cognitive positioning, mental models, and ideological standpoints of an individual or group on certain discourse issues. Consequently, as the burning issue of secession continues to resurface in Nigeria's political landscape, its rabid contestation in online space poses a threat to nationhood in that cyberspace can be harnessed to sustain the propagation of separatism and national disintegration.

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### **3 Portraying the Bad**

#### **Soft Repressions Used by the Polish Public Television During the First Wave of the Women's Protests in 2020-2021**

*Karolina Owczarek*

The pandemic presented a challenging time for governments due to the unprecedented conditions. Authorities had to prioritize citizens' health and protect them from the coronavirus. However, some political regimes used this time to disseminate anti-democratic content and consolidate their political power (Rak 2022). Nevertheless, they required tools for these actions. One such tool is the National Television in Poland, which has been taken over since 2015 when Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) won the election (Rak 2021a). The network uses various manipulative and socio-techniques to discredit and undermine their opponents as well as those who hold differing views (Rezmer-Płotka 2022a). One of these groups is the Polish Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine whether the soft repressions proposed by Myra Marx Ferree with changes proposed by Rak and Owczarek were employed by Polish State Television (TVP INFO) against the Polish Women's Strike and their supporters

During the pandemic, Poland was engulfed in protests, some of which were related to economic factors, while others were against the



Polish government and its Covid-19 policies (Rak, Bäcker, and Osiewicz 2021). However, one of the biggest waves of protests during this time was triggered by the verdict of the Polish Constitutional Court on October 22nd, 2020. This ruling declared a provision unconstitutional that allowed for abortion in cases of severe and irreversible fetal defects, as well as life-threatening incurable diseases (Dz.U. 2021 poz. 175). The aforementioned judgment tightened an already extremely strict abortion law, which did not please Polish citizens.

The following study consists of five parts. The first part is the introduction above, and the second part presents the background of the research problem, which is necessary to understand the purpose of the study. The third part indicates the theoretical and methodological background for the research. The fourth part tests the hypothesis proposed in the methodological section, divided into smaller parts, which examine specific forms of soft repression. The paper concludes with the fifth part, which includes conclusions and recommendations. This research makes an empirical contribution to studies on soft repression in Poland.

### **Research problem background**

Since the adoption of the Law on Protection of the Human Fetus and Conditions Permitting Pregnancy Termination (Dz.U. 1993 nr 17 poz. 78), there have been several attempts to change the law to make it less restrictive, but all of them have been unsuccessful (Rezmer-Płotka 2022b). In October 2016, the Polish Women's Strike was founded (Osiewicz 2020) as a result of two events. The first event was the rejection in September 2016 of the „Save Women” abortion bill, while at the same time, the „Stop Abortion” bill was submitted for

consideration. The attempt to further restrict an already severely strict abortion law led to protests across Poland in October 2016 called the „Black Protest.” Women were demonstrating against the proposed bill, but some divisions emerged. The Polish Women's Strike as an organization did not have a specified goal; instead, they focused on gathering as many participants as possible. Therefore, some protesters had a different viewpoint from others. Some were supporting the loosening up of abortion laws, while others were defending the „abortion compromise” from 1993 (Król and Pustulka 2018). However, these divisions were not important to people when, on October 22nd, 2020, the Polish Constitutional Court declared two provisions of the „abortion compromise” unconstitutional. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that during this time, other problems, such as restrictions on the freedom of assembly, were introduced to protect citizens' health and life.

Two years before the Second World War, Karl Loewenstein introduced the concept of militant democracy. The author argued that if a country wants to be a strong democracy, it needs to limit some of its freedoms to protect itself from enemies of democracy, including freedom of speech, assembly, and the press (Loewenstein 1937). However, in order for these measures to work, they must be aimed at genuine enemies of democracy. Overusing this power can lead to a backsliding democracy (Rak and Bäcker 2022a). Some scholars have found empirical evidence that authorities use these restrictions to limit the sovereignty of the political nation (Rak and Bäcker 2022b). Therefore, it is crucial to distinguish between limitations that work in favor of the sovereignty of the political nation and those that are created against it.

The Polish case is questionable due to provisions provided by the Polish government to limit freedom of assembly during the pandemic. The Polish Constitution states that freedom of assembly can only be limited by a bill in specific cases, namely when a state of emergency or state of war is in force in the country (Dz.U. 1997 nr 79 poz. 483). Neither of these was in effect. Therefore, under the guise of protecting citizens' health and life, limitations were established regarding assembly and protest, even if they were unconstitutional (Rak 2021b). In this case, it was easier to introduce controversial abortion laws because citizens were scared of the coronavirus and potentially facing fines and penalties for protesting and assembling. Nevertheless, restrictions did not stop women from fighting for their rights. Therefore, PiS needed to find another way to repress this group.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Background**

According to Charles Tilly (1978), repression refers to any action taken by another group that increases the cost of collective contention. There is a basic division between hard and soft repression based on whether they are violent or not. However, scholars generally agree that non-violent types of repression are rarely discussed in the literature (García 2013). This does not mean that they are not discussed at all. As argued by Anette Linden and Bert Klandermans (2006), soft repression can serve as a perfect introduction to the use of hard repression. Moreover, they are extremely effective when used in combination (Tin-bor Hui 2020). Scholars suggest that soft repression is becoming increasingly useful for influencing social movements and minorities (Lindekilde 2010). Additionally, for governments, using this type of repression can help avoid a backfire effect (Linden and Klandermans 2006).

Myra Marx Ferree (2004) presented the most influential typology of soft repression in her paper entitled „Soft Repression: Ridicule, Stigma, and Silencing in Gender-based Movements”. Therefore, not only is it the most influential typology, but it has also been tested on similar social movements to the one that is the subject of the following study. Ferree describes the first type of soft repression as ridicule at the micro-level. According to the author, the use of ridicule to mock people can be a tool to diminish and disarm cultural challengers who are mobilizing or have already mobilized (Ferree 2004). The author provides an example of women's movements in the early 60s who were fighting for their rights and were ridiculed by being labeled „women's lib,” which was a mocking abbreviation. Moreover, Ferree mentions the term „feminazi,” which is often used to repress women who are fighting for their rights (Ferree 2004).

As the second level of soft repression, Ferree presents Meso-level stigma. According to the author, stigma at the group level can result from ridicule at the individual level, but it is something more than that. Ferree defines stigma as „impaired collective identity, where the connection with the group is a source of discredit and devaluation because that is how the group as a whole is viewed.” Ferree also indicates that stigma is a „cultural strategy to prevent collective action by actively discouraging identification with a group that could make claims against an institution.” Moreover, the author points out that stigma mostly affects social movements that already have credibility in civil society. Stigma is used as a tool to make identification with the group more costly and to limit further gains (Ferree 2004).

The last type of soft repression that Ferree identifies is macro-level silencing. It can occur in two forms. The first form is when social movements are excluded from media discourse and are ignored by

them, creating a reality without the movement. The second form of silencing in mass media is the selective choice of speakers about the movement. Mass media do not give an opportunity to a specific social movement or to the protesters to express their points of view or statements. Thus, theoretically, the social movement is not excluded from the media discourse, but at the same time, there is no viewpoint presented by those who should have a voice and the possibility to make a statement (Ferree 2004).

The typology presented will be used as a theoretical tool in this research, with some minor changes proposed by Joanna Rak and Karolina Owczarek. Specifically, all forms of soft repression can occur at every possible level. For instance, ridiculing can also be used at the meso and macro levels. Stigmatization can be employed at the micro level, as well as the macro level, and silencing can also occur at the micro and meso levels (Rak and Owczarek, 2022). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that ridicule nowadays can also occur in the form of photos or videos. Therefore, it should be implied into ridiculing that next to labeling, other forms can appear. Qualitative source analysis was used to conduct this study, employing qualitative content analysis techniques. Sources included in this research are content published on the TVP INFO website. However, the sources are narrowed down to include only news that contains the following codes: protest, OSK, and Strajk Kobiet. The starting point is October 22nd, 2020, the day when the decision of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal was made, and the closing point is January 26th, 2021, one day before the second wave of protests (one day before the official publishing of the sentence). The research posits a theoretically grounded hypothesis: TVP INFO used soft repressions, such as ridicule, stigma, and silencing, at every possible level against the Polish Women's Strike and their supporters.

## **Ridicule**

As mentioned before, ridiculing is aimed at belittling or disarming the repressed. These actions are based on the use of unkind words to create an image of the victim. Nowadays, it is impossible to exclude from the discourse about soft repression the use of unfavorable photos or videos for ridiculing purposes. The most important thing is to make the person or group look foolish, ridiculed, and bullied. TVP INFO attempted to ridicule the leader of the Polish Women's Strike, Marta Lempart. Firstly, they published articles with hostile photos of her in article headlines (TVP INFO 2020a). In the photos, she looks unfriendly and grumpy. Moreover, the photo angle did not work in her favor.

All of the cases mentioned above are just a part of the soft repression exerted on the leader of the Polish Women's Strike. TVP INFO utilized the second option of ridicule, which involved directly insulting and using unkind words towards Marta Lempart. One example was describing her as a „vulgar feminist” (wulgarna feministka) (TVP INFO 2020b). Furthermore, according to Ferree's theory, TVP INFO was trying to create a negative connotation associated with the word „feminist.”

Ridiculing also occurred at the group level. TVP INFO published an article entitled “They (women) were driving to the Women's Strike march, suddenly the engine died. “Oh, fuel. I did not fill up the tank”. They published a fragment from a live transmission made by the woman who was driving to the protest. The title, when read out loud, sounds like the woman is making fun of herself. Moreover, “oh, fuel” sounds funny and cheerful. Nevertheless, the original video is attached to the article where the woman is absolutely serious and her statement was “Fuel...”. Additionally, in the article, the

reader can find a Twitter post from Dariusz Koralczuk who commented on this situation in a mocking way. He used the following emojis to express his feelings about it: a laughing face, a monkey that holds its head, and a person who is doing a popular gesture – ‘facepalm’ (TVP INFO 2020w). Because of the generalization and use of the plural form in the headline (even though in the article single form was used), I conclude that this soft repression was aimed at the women who are supporters of the Polish Women’s Strike.

In summary, TVP INFO utilized various approaches to ridicule. Firstly, they used verbal ridicule as well as ridicule through photos. Secondly, they targeted supporters on different levels - both individual and group. TVP INFO did not use this type of repression too often. It occurred incidentally; therefore, it did not have a big impact on the social movement. Nevertheless, the study provides evidence that ridicule can appear also at the meso level of analysis, and contrary to Ferree’s theory it does not have to be done in “face-to-face” interaction.

## **Stigma**

The Polish Women's Strike has already established credibility in civil society, as evidenced by numerous strikes organized in Poland since 2016. Therefore, stigmatization can be used as a form of soft repression against them. This specific type of soft repression is focused on constructing stigma by portraying a person's trait or behavior as evidence that they are inferior to others, that is, defective. TVP INFO made several attempts to portray a group of protesters as inadequate by using photos. Many articles have photos in their headlines that portray the protesters in various disadvantageous ways. For example, one photo shows a man with a mask of Jaroslaw Kaczynski (the president of the ruling party) with his hands up (TVP INFO 2020c).

The photo makes it appear as though the protesters are immature and having too much fun, despite the seriousness of the topic they were protesting. However, this is not the only example where TVP INFO tried to depict protesters as immature. Two other headlines contain a photo of a man disguised as a unicorn (TVP INFO 2020d, 2020e). Although the articles were published with almost a week's break, the editors decided to use the „unicorn man” as an example of the protesters.

TVP INFO also attempted to associate the main symbol of the women's strike, the lightning bolt, with something negative. In this case, they also used photos to repress the protesters. In one of the photos, two young girls had drawn lightning bolts on their faces, which is not unusual for people demonstrating their support for the strike. However, the girls were also wearing devil's horns (TVP INFO 2020f). Therefore, it was easy to associate the Polish Women's Strike with evil. The editors of TVP INFO used this specific photo in the headlines of different articles to increase the power of this repression. It is worth noting that TVP INFO, as well as the ruling party, promotes Catholic values. Therefore, it was beneficial for them to associate the protesters' views as antagonistic to those values. Editors often appealed to Catholic values, suggesting that they would be destroyed by protesters (TVP INFO 2020h, 2020i, 2020j, 2020k). TVP INFO did not take into consideration that the demonstrators could also be Catholics. They were trying to portray them as enemies of traditional Polish values and religion.

It is worth mentioning that the aforementioned methods are not the only ways in which TVP INFO stigmatized those who participated in pro-choice protests in Poland. These actions took place during the second wave of the pandemic when there was a high risk of



infection. TVP INFO took advantage of the situation to stigmatize protesters. Numerous headlines were created to scare citizens and portray protesters and their supporters as those who did not care about the safety of Polish citizens (TVP INFO 2020l, 2020m). Another example is the headline „Protests Despite Restrictions,” even though they were unconstitutional and therefore illegal (TVP INFO 2020o). Additionally, they attempted to associate people with leftist views with aggression and violence. One example is the headline „The Left (party – Lewica), You Have Blood on Your Hands” (TVP INFO 2020n).

Stigmatization also occurred at the individual level. TVP INFO targeted the most recognizable leftist activists as well as opposition politicians. Rafał Trzaskowski, an opponent of Andrzej Duda in the presidential election, was criticized many times for his support for the Polish Women’s Strike (TVP INFO 2020p, 2020r, 2020s). TVP INFO portrayed this support as a defective trait of this opposition politician. However, Trzaskowski was not the only one who was condemned. The same situation applied to other opposition politicians such as Jacek Jaśkowiak and Jacek Majchrowski, presidents of the cities of Poznań and Kraków respectively (TVP INFO 2020t, 2020u).

Likewise in the previous soft repression, TVP INFO decided to use various approaches. In the stigmatization case, they approached protesters on two different levels – firstly they stigmatized supporters as a group and secondly, they aimed at individuals. Equally individuals and the group have already credibility in society. Namely, the social movement had supporters and all of the individuals were important people in Polish politics. This soft repression could be seen more often than ridiculing because TVP INFO was trying to raise the cost either to be a participant in a social movement or a supporter of one of the stigmatized individuals (Presidents of the cities of Poznań and

Kraków). What is more, it could even have an impact on the political parties in which they are participating.

## **Silencing**

Withdrawing attention from social movement mobilization or excluding them from having a voice in mass media are two ways to produce silence on a macro level. However, providing media coverage of protests does not necessarily mean giving them a voice, as it can exclude the framework that gives meaning to social movement activity. In this case, TVP INFO omitted to give a voice to the most important people - the strike organizers - who did not have a chance to join the public debate on national television. On the other hand, TVP INFO published statements out of context, making it seem like the leaders were not worth listening to due to their behavior. As seen in the video added to the article, it was a montage of the organizers' most vulgar speeches (TVP INFO 2020b).

It is worth mentioning that silencing also took place in the form of a lack of communication between TVP INFO and those who supported the strikes or participated in them. However, TVP INFO frequently presented views that defended the judgment of the Polish Constitutional Court and criticized the protesters. Furthermore, TVP INFO attempted to present the „Polish Women's Strike views” and explain why they were wrong, both to the protesters and to society (TVP INFO 2020g).

To sum up, it can be seen during the analysis that this type also occurred in both ways – not giving the opportunity to speak for people who are responsible for the social movement and not communicating with people who are actual supporters. They did not use silencing in the way of ignoring the social movement, because it would exclude the

possibility to use other soft repression that could have been more beneficial for repressive. TVP INFO was trying to present the social movement perspective without giving them the opportunity to speak. Therefore, I conclude, that occurrence of this soft repression was on a common level.

## **Conclusion**

The research findings presented above partially support the hypothesis that TVP used soft repressions such as ridicule, stigma, and silencing against the Polish Women's Strike and their supporters. However, not all of the repressions were present on every possible level, so the hypothesis cannot be fully accepted. Nonetheless, it does not rule out the possibility of these repressions occurring in future research.

It is worth noting that the typology presented by Ferree can be applied on different levels, as Rak and Owczarek pointed out. This paper provides empirical evidence for that claim. The most commonly used form of soft repression in TVP INFO's coverage was silencing because, in their reports nor protesters, neither organizers have a voice. Stigmatization, which occurred on both group and individual levels was used often. As previously mentioned, one important characteristic of both individual and group levels is credibility in society; so, the cost of supporting either a social movement or one of the Presidents was higher. The least utilized form of soft repression was ridiculing. TVP employed this form of soft repression on two different levels (individual and group) and used two different approaches to target supporters of the Polish Women's Strike. Namely, they used labeling to create a negative connotation with the word "feminist" and on the other hand they used photos and videos to ridicule individuals

and groups but the aim was common – make them look foolish and trivial.

It is crucial to note the similarity between Polish National Television and the ruling party's narrative. It can be concluded that TVP INFO aimed to maintain its line of narrative and display support for the ruling party's decisions. Repressions were mainly focused on people with opposing views and opposition politicians. This highlights the importance of scholars conducting research on Polish National Television and its reliability and credibility, as well as its coverage. Television can easily become a political tool for manipulating society for votes in future elections, and it can deepen divisions in society, which is harmful to a democratic regime.

In the future, it would be valuable to examine what types of soft repressions were used during the second wave of protests after the verdict was announced, as this research only covers the first wave. Additionally, research should be conducted on the use of soft repression by Public Media in Poland against other groups with differing views from the ruling party.

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## **Part II**

### **Memory and Trauma in Crisis Representations**

## 4 Breakdown Lockdown

### Visual Representation of Crisis During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Popular Music Videos

*Alessa K. Paluch*

If read as popular texts in John Fiske's sense, what do music videos of the pandemic years reveal about meaning production by people living through lockdowns? Are there successful music videos coping with the pandemic in some way or the other? If so, how is the crisis represented visually? Are those music videos functioning as an escapist outlet, a call for action and/or a metaphorical mirror?

To answer these questions a two-step analysis was realized: First several videos to songs which were explicitly about covid19 were systematically analysed via an elaborated analysis-design. Those videos try to establish a positive vibe through their chosen filmic means. There is only visual representation of the crisis (through pandemic-related iconography like face masks and scrubs), the crisis isn't represented visually. In a second approach three music videos which are linked to the pandemic through production year, set, involved figures, filmic means and their interpretation are exemplified.

The videos which are not representing crisis visually are strong calls for action while the videos representing crisis visually could be interpreted as emotional outlets, helping the viewers to play out crisis

in the safest way possible. The viewers therefor gain back (emotional) power over the pandemic situation.

### **Reading Music Videos as Popular Texts**

*„Popular texts must offer popular meanings and pleasures – popular meanings are constructed out of the relevances between the text and everyday life, popular pleasures derive from the production of these meanings by the people, from the power to produce them.“*

Fiske, John: Understanding Popular Culture.

London/New York 1989, 126.

If read as popular texts in John Fiske's sense, what do music videos of the global pandemic years 2020, 2021 and 2022 reveal about meaning and pleasures of the people living through the first global lockdowns in history? Are there successful music videos coping with the pandemic in some way or the other? If so, how is this crisis represented visually? How do the videos present a visual world in which crisis is played out for the viewer?

With John Fiske's *Reading the Popular* (1989a) and *Understanding the Popular* (1989b) as vantage points it is fruitful to analyse music videos as popular texts. Today's youth culture may not be shaped by music videos in the way *Generation MTV* was, but it is still influenced by music videos as a visual medium with (economic, symbolic, and social) power – otherwise the artists wouldn't bother to do them anymore. Fiske's concept of people's active use of cultural products and their active production of meaning comes in handy when talking about music videos as cultural artifacts. The still virulent

Marxist idea of brainwashing the masses through entertainment isn't fully capturing what popular culture can provide for the masses consuming it. Rather than being passive victims of manipulative producers of numbing entertainment, Fiske (1989b, 23–47) suggests understanding the products of popular culture as offers to the consumers who actively decide to use this product or not, to appropriate the material, to give it meaning beyond the producers' intent. Therefore it is possible for a mass product to be used in a progressive, empowering or liberating way. It is the consumer who gives the mass culture product meaning and importance. Successful popular practices or products can therefore be read as a strong expression of its consumers (Fiske 1989b, 103 – 127).

While television left the consumer with little room to reply, today's internet culture makes it way easier to track the consumers' reactions to the product. For music videos on the video platform YouTube this is a. the number of views, b. the likes and dislikes and c. the comments. The music video itself is embedded in a variety of other popular texts like concerts, interviews, paparazzi coverage, (social) media appearances, etcetera. While it can be argued that today's media use is highly cross- and mixed medial, this paper can only focus on the music video itself.

## **Method and Research Design**

Choosing adequate samples without doing a whole discourse analysis on music videos produced and released during the Covid19 pandemic must be a somewhat eclectic procedure. Following the lead question *Are there music videos visually representing the pandemic experience and if so, how?*, the first approach was to watch several videos to songs which lyrics were explicitly about covid19 (as derived from a Wikipedia

collection on songs about Covid19<sup>3</sup>). Only songs by already famous artists were considered – as the premise was to examine music videos as popular texts, which implies that a certain range of popularity needs to be given to spark the interest of the audience.

Videos fitting these criteria were those accompanying the following songs: Bon Jovi's *Do what you can*, BTS's *Life goes on*, Ariana Grande's and Justin Bieber's *Stuck with U* and Alicia Keys' *Good Job*.

*Music Video Analysis Sheet*  
Designed by Dr. phil. Alessa K. Paluch, 2023  
Loosely Based on Heidi Peeters: *The Semiotics of Music Videos. It must be written in the Stars*. In: *Image & Narrative. Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative*. May 2004. [URL: <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/issue08/heidipeeters.htm>] (Last accessed May 16th 2023).

	Music Video No. 1	Music Video No. 2	Music Video No. 3
<b>Representational Signs („Telling“):</b>			
plot			
Costumes			
props			
characters			
locations			
Genre			
<b>Non-Representational Signs („Showing“):</b>			
Colours			
Lighting			
Camera-angles			
Editing			
Special effects			
Musical „Score“			
Peculiarity			
„Utopian Effect“			
The star as center			

**[Fig.1]**

To analyse the videos an analysis design was developed, which is loosely based on the film theorist Heidi Peeter's article *The Semiotics of Music Videos. It must be written in the Stars* (2004). In rejection of Frederic Jameson's definition of music videos Peeters makes distinctions between representational and presentational signs and

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<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia Page: Category: Songs about the COVID-19 pandemic. URL: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Songs\\_about\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Songs_about_the_COVID-19_pandemic) . Last accessed: 01.03.24.

non-representational signs and adapts a semiotic approach for music video analysis. Following Peeters (2004) music videos need to be read in the context of the musician's specific star-centered, utopian universe, considering the star's image, history, genre context, fan base, lifestyle and prior texts like music videos, tours, and public appearances.

With these factors in mind the actual analysis design used here considers the representational, presentational, and non-representational signs in a film analysis-based framework. Semiotics, Film Theory and Film Analysis provide the background to *read* music video as popular text in a way that takes the language-based idea of visual literacy (see Chung 2013) into account without sidestepping the self-logic of the genre, celebrity culture and fandom – which all are highly linked to the performers.

### **Visual representation of the crisis: Bon Jovi's *Do what you can* and Alicia Keys' *Good Job***

In the video accompanying the song *Do what you can* (released August 2020) Jon Bon Jovi is roaming through New York City during a lockdown. It is sunny outside, Bon Jovi only wearing jeans and a t-shirt. He is wearing a black face mask but takes it off early in the video. The camera is following him through the empty city, often walking next to him with a slightly lowered angle. The viewer is supposed to feel like walking with Bon Jovi, safely stopping for an ambulance rushing by. The shots of the singer are combined with footage of scenes of everyday life during the pandemic and so-called essential workers on their jobs. The montage shows hospital staff, cleaning personnel, delivery workers, but also volunteers at a food bank. The visual markers for the pandemic presented here are shots of deserted streets, people wearing



face masks and/or scrubs, people cleaning surfaces with disinfection and a dense appearance of uniformed forces like police, firemen and military.

Conspicuously all the presented workers seem relaxed, some even happily dancing, smiling into or waving at the camera. Without the visual markers the video could be read as a portrait of everyday people in an idealised New York. The ethos of the hard-working everyday people is also highlighted in the lyrics and is part of the image of Bon Jovi as a down-to-earth, truly American, *clean* rock band. *Do what you can* is both in its lyrics and in its visuals a call for action with a neoliberal appeal and an uplifting affirmation: the hard work essential workers must do even in exceptional circumstances like a global pandemic is at the same time inevitable and morally superior.



[Fig.2]

The music video to Alicia Keys song *Good Job* (released May 2020) is quite similar to Bon Jovi's but hasn't been viewed as much. We see Keys in a sunny, light-flooded room, dressed in white, sitting at a white piano. The room is tidy and clean, which is enforced by the whiteness of her clothes and the piano. In the background we see

photos of children, one would assume those are the performer's own. The mood here is warm, light and relaxed. The sequences of Keys playing the piano and singing are combined with footage of essential workers, displaying similar visual markers used in the Bon Jovi video: face mask, scrubs, uniforms and nasal swabs. While Bon Jovi's video also incorporated scenes from the daily life of so many people during the lockdown (zoom meetings, home schooling, meeting outside while social distancing), Keys' video has significantly more footage of uniformed personnel like police, firemen, bus drivers and military.



**[Fig.3]**

Both montages place the performer as the safe, but concerned centre of a utopian New York City, where all workers are happily doing their share, regardless of wage, social status or social appreciation. The performers themselves are shown as model citizens, encouraging ideal civic behaviour like staying at home, wearing a face mask, donating, honouring the essential workers and trusting the state-representing people in uniforms (for visual culture's impact on neoliberal ideas of ideal citizenship see Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 93 – 133).

### **Ariana Grande's and Justin Bieber's *Stuck with U***

Ariana Grande's and Justin Bieber's music video for their collaboration *Stuck with U* (released May 2020) is a compilation of footage from the performers at home and a multitude of their fans' self-made home videos, often shown just a few seconds in split screen. The emphasis is on the experience of staying inside during the lockdowns, having to cope with being locked inside. While especially young people (who are the target audience of Grande and Bieber) have most likely experienced boredom, conflict with parents and siblings, a lack of physical outlet and social interaction with peers, the featured videos highlight happily dancing in the families living room, being close with the other family members and pets.



**[Fig.4]**

The video has a participative component, as fans of Bieber and Grande handed in short home videos. The montage and the use of split screens are evoking a feeling of simultaneousness and sameness of experiences – which clearly isn't given. The stark contrast between Bieber's luxurious living room and his spacious basement gym and the much smaller, densely packed rooms of his fans may reveal a lived

experience that differs from the displayed lightness and affection. But critical awareness towards these displays of wealth can't be traced in the comment section.

### **BTS' *Life goes on***

The music video to BTS's *Life goes on* (released November 2020) is more fictionalized, abstaining from showing documentary-style footage and most aforementioned visual markers. A face mask is taken off just seconds into the video. The seven members of BTS are shown sheltering in place together, playing video games together, cuddling. Intimacy is also visually evoked through close ups and narrow rooms like the inside of a car and a two-bed bedroom filled with all seven performers wearing pyjamas. Other than in the Grande and Bieber video there is no display of luxury or wealth. The rooms are small and decent, which reinforces the idea of BTS as regular young people who are just as affected by the crisis-induced boredom, sadness, and uncertainty as their fans. By doing so the video pays a subtle tribute to the more complicated experiences their fans may have encountered during lockdowns. The video ends in black-and-white with the band fantasising being on stage again, something their fans might be doing just as well. Of course, the members of BTS are not shown as depressed or suffering, but only slightly melancholic, reinforcing the title's message that life goes on. The video also fulfils fan fantasies by relying heavily on the idea of the group's members as close friends whose lives are exponentially better just by being together.

Interestingly those videos do not visually express the crisis of lockdown and quarantine but show and highlight a more positive vibe in a sense of moral boosting with messages like *Stay stronge, hang in there* or *let's make the best of this*. While Bon Jovi and Keys are shown

walking or singing in sunshine, alternating with footage of front-line workers quite happily doing their job, Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande and BTS are shown quarantining in their fictional and actual homes – with the glimpse into the star’s reality as a true fan service. Bon Jovi, Keys, Grande and Bieber use the music video to emphasize on getting into action: literally by displaying movement like walking and dancing, metaphorical by displaying helping at charity organisations and on a metalevel by using the music video as a call for donations and/or donating the proceedings of the video.



**[Fig.5]**

While thankfulness to the front-line workers, cleaning and decorating the home and donating money and/or time to charities may have been widely shared experiences during the Covid19 lockdowns (at least in the western world), these videos do not capture the darker feelings most people under strict lockdown rules described having, like anxiety, frustration, stress, boredom and/or exhaustion – not to mention the real thread of being sick with a potentially deadly virus or caring for someone who is. In these videos there is only visual representation of the crisis, but the crisis isn’t represented visually.

### **Crisis represented visually**

The question remains if there are successful (e.g. widely received) music videos which represent the pandemic experience in a visual way. So, another, more qualitative-analysis-based approach was taken: The nominations of the 2020s, 2021s and 2022s MTV Music Awards and the Grammy Awards' Music Video Category were searched for videos which showcased aspects of crisis through visual mood and plot. Even though their song texts have nothing to do with the pandemic at first sight, three music videos can be linked to the Covid19 pandemic experiences through production year, production set, number of figures, filmic means and the interpretation deriving from the latter: Billie Eilish's *Male Fantasy* (2021), The Weeknd's *Out of time* (2022) and Kendrick Lamar's and Taylor Paige's *We cry together* (2022). All three videos were produced during the pandemic, are filmed in one set or at one location and feature a very limited number of persons: Lamar and Paige as a couple, three persons in The Weeknd's and only one in Eilish's. All four musicians are acting in their videos, therefore only The Weeknd's has additional personnel, who are both also famous: the actress and model HoYeong Yun (known from another COVID19-phenomenon called *Squid Game*) and the American actor and comedian Jim Carrey.

### **Billie Eilish's *Male Fantasy*, 2021**

Eilish's song *Male Fantasy* is about grieving after a breakup and going through heart break. The video represents this experience visually: An intimacy between viewer and star is established through many close-ups of Eilish's face through mirroring, a camera that follows her slowly around empty rooms and observes her in various inconsiderable situations like lying in bed, eating food joylessly and sitting in front of

a turned off TV. The camera angle is most of the times a little off, cutting frames and lurking around corners – as so the audience is witnessing a situation that it is not meant to see, like the voyeuristic surveillance camera-like shot of the bedroom or a glimpse of her sitting on the toilette scrolling through her phone.

The colour-palette is distinctly toned down, mostly utilizing cold colours like light blue, white, dark blue and black. Even slightly warmer colours like light yellow or brown are dim. There are just a few light-dark contrasts. Eilish isn't lit in a special way, so it seems that there is only natural dim light in the house. The featured rooms are mostly small and cramped, like the kitchen or bathroom. The unusual camera perspectives show these rooms in total, evoking a sense of tightness and being closed in. The whole atmosphere of the video provokes a strong feeling of being trapped inside the house – which was arguably the most common feeling during the covid19 lockdowns. Even though the song is about feeling and being alone after a breakup, the visuals in the video convey a crisis-experience valid for being single during Covid19.



[Fig.6]

### **The Weeknd's *Out of time*, 2022**

The Weeknd's *Out of time* is part of four singles from the concept album *Dawn FM*, which music videos combined tell a story of the horrors of growing old, dying and being dead. Each video features graphic horror movie elements. For this analysis the focus lays on the music video to *Out of time* – which may be the least graphic, but it is none the less unsettling.

While the song's lyrics are also about heart break after a lover left for someone new, the plot of the video is telling a very different story: We see a man and a woman meeting seemingly by chance in an elevator and then again at a hotel bar, starting to enjoy themselves in the hotel environment, doing karaoke together, singing, drinking, and flirting. Throughout the video the camera is following the two and moving quickly around the figures, sometimes getting uncomfortably close. The filmed rooms are deserted, there are no other people around, not even in usually crowded settings like a hotel bar or reception hall. The colours are dark and dim, mainly dark brown and crème beige. Both figures are dressed in black in a chic and posh style. The huge windows just open the view into the dark night and to indefinite lights of a city.

Nearing the end of the video the flirty vibe changes into a horror movie scenario, where the male protagonist seems to come out of anaesthesia, having undergone surgery in some odd rejuvenescence procedure. It gets obvious that the first part of the video was a dreamlike, narcotic-induced fantasy of happier times.

While in the first three-fourth of the video the camera follows the couple, the last fourth is filmed from the perspective of the protagonist in a point of view-angle – facing himself in a reflection, lying helplessly on the surgery table, being on the mercy of a seemingly



crazy doctor (played by Jim Carrey). The reveal that the first part of the video is just a dream, and that *reality* is a state of helplessness, of being dependent on doctors, medicine and science may talk to the experience of powerlessness while living through a pandemic and its restrictions. The uncanniness of the situation is convincingly represented here in a visual way.



[Fig.7]

### **Kendrick Lamar's and Taylor Paige's *We cry together***

The video to Lamar's and Paige's rap song "We cry together" (live recorded in March 2020, released as a short film in September 2022) has only 5 million views and is the least popular of the here mentioned videos. Nevertheless, it is the most artistically ambitious and risk taking of the samples. The track itself is a spoken word duet, where Lamar and Paige act out a fighting couple. The lyrics are very intense, representing a heated argument with a lot of curse words, obscenities, repetitions, and accusations that some might call typical for a toxic heterosexual relationship. The video is a very direct depiction of the lyrics, with Lamar and Paige performing their lines live in front of the camera. The video is shot in one sequence. The camera on eye-level is

slowly approaching and following the couple through their small apartment, making the viewers close, but passive bystanders to the abusive fight.

The camera is following the female figure, which leads to two possible, contradictory identifications: The viewer looks at her through the common male gaze and identifies with the male protagonist or the viewer identifies with her, backs her up and roots for her. The most problematic and suspense-packed moment in the video is the one where the male figure hinders the female figure to get her car keys and leave for work. But the woman isn't much bothered by his manipulative action, she just takes the keys out of his hands after following him into another room. The viewer is on their own judging the fairness of the disputing parties.

The colours are very dark, the rooms are lit poorly through the orange lights of a few lamps. Artificial blue light comes in through the windows and via the light in the open kitchen. The whole set sets a strong theatrical atmosphere, which derives from the spoken word live performance, the missing natural light, and the stage-like space.

Song and video end with the couple getting closer and initiating physical contact, cooling off with or through sexual intercourse. The camera then withdraws from the scenery via where the kitchen wall is supposed to be, giving us a view on the whole set design like a revelation that neither the fight was a real thing nor its representation.

Because of the tense atmosphere, the closed-in-ness, the claustrophobic tension, the sense of threat, the toxicity of the situation and the couple's overall dynamic, this video can be described as an elaborate visual representation of the emotional palette of the pandemic: the feeling of threat, the uncertainty, the confined space, the

tension between being repulsed and depending on the persons you stay put with and the impossibility to resolve the situation in the moment.



[Fig.8]

All three videos analysed here found a compelling visual representation of crisis: Eilish on how lockdown as a single can be monotone, lonely, and depressing; The Weeknd on dreaming of happier times, just to realise the current uncanny situation that leaves one in the mercy of science, and Lamar and Paige on being forced to spend too much time together in a rather unhealthy relationship. Even though the songs and videos do not directly cope with the pandemic they do find a way to transfer some common experiences connected to the Covid19 pandemic into an exaggerated, but well-fitting visual representation.

## **Conclusion**

The opening questions were: How do music videos present a visual world in which crisis is played out for the viewer? The analysis showed that the videos which were about the crisis but were not representing crisis visually were strong calls for action (e.g. to make donations, to

stay home and to hang on). They were also emotionally charged, trying to evoke a positive feeling of proudness of the strength, perseverance, and resilience most people had to cling to during the lockdowns. In contrast the videos representing a crisis through their visual means could be interpreted as emotional outlets, helping the viewers to safely play out the negative feelings. The idea of music video as a redirection activity only holds up if the experiences shown in The Weeknds *Out of time* and Lamar & Paiges *We cry together* are recognized as extreme and exaggerated. They can also read as escapist when read in the sense of *My life is by far not that bad*. Considering Eilishs *Male Fantasy*, it can be emphasized that those music videos play out crisis in the safest way possible for the viewer, who can then decide by themselves how much to invest emotionally. In this way the sampled music videos enable the viewer to gain back emotional power over the crisis-laden pandemic situation.

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## 5 Beautiful Faraway?

### Victory Day, War and Time-Traveling on TikTok

*Anna Greszta*

*“I hear the voice from the Beautiful Faraway  
It is calling me to wonderful lands.  
I hear the voice – and the hefty voice is asking:  
What did I do today for the sake of tomorrow?  
(...)  
Beautiful Faraway, don't be cruel to me  
Don't be cruel to me, don't!  
From a clean fountain towards the Beautiful Faraway,  
Towards the Beautiful Faraway  
I'm starting my way.”*

The above lyrics are lines from the song *Beautiful Faraway*, the main musical motif of the Soviet television sensation *Guest from the Future* (1984, directed by Pavel Arsenov). Just as the TV series, revolving around time-traveling pupils-pioneers, achieved success among audiences of various ages and across the regional spectrum of the Eastern Bloc, so did its soundtrack. The lyrical content of the song embodies the belief that a „Beautiful Faraway,” a future that is both wonderful and distant (and possibly Soviet), can be achieved if people in the present work toward it today, opening the question of personal agency and responsibility. The song delineates the transitional phase

in the life of a young individual, demarcating the boundary between carefree youth and the uncharted territory of the future.

The show's popularity has elevated *Beautiful Faraway* to the status of an iconic cultural artifact produced on the Soviet system's cusp. It continues to be consumed and reworked to this day, especially in Russian cultural objects – the latter, as discussed in this chapter, intrinsically entangled with new media practices and affordances.

From various dark-hearted, drum-n-bass remixes on YouTube to accompanying a Russia-developed video game, *Atomic Heart*, a first-person shooter set in Soviet retro-futuristic dystopia. The song served as the soundtrack of a Russian TV series, *Chernobyl: Zone of Exclusion* (2014-2019), which depicted youngsters preventing the Chornobyl catastrophe and, in turn, preventing the USSR from collapsing. It has also been featured as a heart-catching soundscape in a Russian-state aligned film about the war in Donbas, *Hotsunlight* (dir. Brius and Vasserbaum, 2021). In one scene, a chorus of children performs the song at school, their performance violently interrupted by bombing from the „fascist Ukrainian armed forces.” What these reiterations have in common is that they function in the post-Euromaidan (post-2014) media landscape, allude to time-traveling or at least distorted temporal relations, youth (school kids, teenagers, pioneers, young adults), imperial nostalgia and, in the latter example, bringing to the fore the issue of war.

Against this backdrop, we should also delve into the past, specifically to May 2021, when a distinctive trend emerged within Russophone TikTok. This trend involved the fusion of a distorted (slowed, reverbed, drum-n-bass) rendition of *Beautiful Faraway* with content related to the Great Patriotic War (GPW) and the commemoration of the 9th of May – Victory Day. In these TikTok



videos, young individuals elucidate moral distinctions between the past and the present through various means. They draw parallels between the selflessness of youth in 1941 and the carefree nature of today's youth. Some participants opt to attire themselves as counterparts from 1941, accentuating the profound sacrifice made by the previous generation, those who fought in the Great Patriotic War. Within this cohort, numerous TikTokers don Soviet-pioneer attire (consisting of a white shirt and a red scarf) reminiscent of graduating students envisaging their promising futures on the final day of school, a juxtaposition underscored by the sobering reality of their transition into soldiers.

The remixed rendition of *Beautiful Faraway* exhibits a dichotomy, comprising two discernible segments. The initial segment features an angelic voice delivering the original song with minimal alterations, whereas the subsequent section, particularly the dramatic refrain, undergoes a transformation characterized by pitched-down music, heavy bass, and added echo effects. The distinction between these two parts is intended to accentuate the emotional and moralizing dimensions of the temporal journey.

Nevertheless, as is inherent in social media trends, these templates undergo diverse creative manipulations and alterations. TikTok memes are embedded within a complex interplay of numerous semiotic modes and resources (Grzenkiewicz and Wildfeuer, in pub.). However, a unifying factor is observed in the form of the sonic hashtag, indicating the utilization of the same musical template. Consequently, this article, rooted in digital memory studies, aims to explore how the memory and myth of the Great Patriotic War are practiced within the *Beautiful Faraway* TikTok trend. What role does music and platform affordances play in this mnemonic practice? Furthermore, what kind

of temporal relations are engendered through „time traveling,” and how do they connect with the current Russo-Ukrainian war? With these considerations in mind, I will proceed to expound upon the data selection and methods employed in the current analysis.

## **Methodology**

This chapter employs qualitative research methods, including cultural analysis and close reading, alongside digital methods (Rogers 2013). Now, the primacy of audio and music on TikTok will be discussed. TikTok's audio background is considered one of its main unique features (Vizcaino-Verdu and Abidin 2022, 885). The first TikTok showcasing the *Beautiful Faraway* song rendition, which gained popularity in the GPW trend, was posted by a user named „OctoberFire” (anonymized), who was not previously involved in GPW content in any way. In this TikTok, OctoberFire paired the music with clips from the Russian series *Brigade* (dir. Sidorov, 2002), which revolves around a group of friends growing up in the 1990s and becoming entangled in a ruthless world of violent thugs. To align with the music, the initial clips portray youthful fun and boyhood innocence, while the subsequent scenes depict the same youthful faces now older and covered in blood. Therefore, music functions as a storytelling device, accentuating the disparity between the promise of a bright *Beautiful Faraway* and the disillusionment of the violent present. This premise was transposed into GPW meme.

As is the case with every existing sound on the TikTok platform that can be reappropriated by other users for their audio memes, the process of re-signification occurred as the song template gained popularity through the Great Patriotic War-related trend.

TikTok's algorithm-driven content distribution system has given rise to what are known as „transmedia networks,” where narratives traverse and gain new meanings within this singular sound-framework (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin 2022, 886). Furthermore, it should be noted that the same or a similar music template might have been uploaded by other users as well. Thus, whether or not the user OctoberFire was the original uploader of the sound remains speculative. Nevertheless, it is this specific audial hashtag that I focus on in this study.

First, all TikToks using the same music template were collected using the GitHub TikTok scraper tool, along with metadata including likes, shares, play and comment counts, as well as accompanied hashtags, descriptions (including emojis), and usernames.

In a spreadsheet, the videos were organized from the highest likes and play value (1.5M likes and 8.8M play counts) to the lowest, followed by a qualitative evaluation of the content aimed at excluding videos that used the same sound template for another trend or purpose. As such, 24 TikToks were identified and included in this study for further inductive-deductive coding to determine, among other factors, nationality (national identity, attachment, or center of life) and temporal relations presented (time-travel from past to present, from present to past, or other). The first round of coding concluded that within the dataset: 17 TikToks were created by Russian or Russia-based individuals, 4 by Kazakhstan-based users, 2 by Ukrainian users, and 1 from Belarus, while all used Russian language as the mode of verbal communication. Thus, the group was specified as Russophone. However, this should not overlook national sensitivities and specificities of the users, which will be further explored in this chapter.

The coding process proceeded with descriptions of the content and specific tropes deployed in videos, such as whether they referred to the Great Patriotic War only or included the Russo-Ukrainian war (2014-present) as well (only 2 videos did, posted by Ukrainian and Kazakhstan-based users). Such coding helped create clusters to further determine the scope of the article.

All TikToks in the dataset, except for one, were uploaded between May 7th and May 10th, 2021. The exception occurred after the full-scale invasion on May 9th, 2022, explicitly referencing the Russo-Ukrainian war. This situation does not necessarily mean that the music template was not used after May 2021, but rather that the opaque algorithmic power behind TikTok promoted this trend in 2021, while not in the years to follow. In what follows, I will reflect on the ethical implications of TikTok-based and war-related research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Multiple studies, such as Kennedy (2020, 1070) and Sapag et al. (2023, vi), indicate that the majority of TikTok users are young adults, individuals aged 18-24 and underage adolescents. Consequently, alongside ethical considerations regarding the study of human subjects in digital media, there is a pressing need to address the analysis of content created by underage individuals. This task is particularly challenging as it is often impossible to verify the age of creators or people featured in the videos collected for analysis

Another layer of vulnerability arises from the subject matter itself—the celebrations of 9<sup>th</sup> of May and their role in Russian-state militarist and imperialist propaganda. This includes the intertwining of narratives from the Great Patriotic War to justify the war in Ukraine since 2014, exacerbated by the full-scale Russian invasion (in this

chapter I use term „Russo-Ukrainian war” to cover events unfolding since 2014). This narrative manipulation often involves portraying Ukrainians as „Nazis” and Russians as „martyrs and saviors” (Greszta in pub.). In my research on cultural representations of the Russo-Ukrainian war, I delve into these memory-based and conspiracy-driven constructs and the centrality of the Great Patriotic War in shaping conspiratorial memory.

The complicated and often nonlinear interplay between state-driven and bottom-up (digital) memory will be examined in the subsequent sections. In this complex landscape, the videos under analysis form part of a network within a highly polarized array of cultural representations of past and present wars. This context renders individual users vulnerable in various ways, as evidenced by the repercussions faced by those who post politicized and (even ambiguously) anti-Russian state content online, a report of an anonymous Ukrainian artist who experienced the occupation of Kherson can serve as an example (Voices from Ukraine 2022).

While the study analyzes audio-visual data, it is crucial to recognize that these videos are created by specific individuals, some of whom are regular users, while others can be framed as macro-celebrities (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin 2022, 888). Therefore, the potential implications of academic inquiry on these individuals should be considered. In digital research, the issue of informed consent holds significance. Despite the public availability of all videos in the dataset, they might not have been released with the knowledge of all their final uses and consequences. Building on the methodology outlined by Arantxa Vizcaino-Verdu and Crystal Abidin (2022) regarding music challenges on TikTok and drawing from the ethical framework of Internet scholar Annette Markham (2012), I have opted to anonymize

creators' usernames and their appearance. This was achieved through collaboration with Bogdan Nastase, the developer of FULCRUM, a tool that utilizes AI to ensure non-destructive anonymization of faces while preserving the emotional range of the image and its quality, thus sustaining the analytical potential of the picture. Following Markham's notion of „creative fabrication,” this approach prioritizes user privacy in ambiguous online contexts (Markham 2012,335), while allowing co-opted and creative ways for knowledge production.

Before proceeding further, I would like to discuss the language used in the dataset and its implications. To maintain linguistic consistency within the dataset, I referred to the networked community within the *Beautiful Faraway* trend as „Russophone.” It's important to note that this term solely pertains to language use, as all users utilized Russian in the specific videos analyzed. While it is acknowledged that the term „Russophone” may carry connotations of Russian (linguistic) imperialism, in this context, it is used to differentiate from the term „Russian,” which may denote a nation, politically bounded territory, or its citizens (Platt and Lipovetsky 2023, 40). „Russian” is often accompanied by narratives of „great Russian culture” and „the Russian soul” (ibid.). Therefore, individuals identified as Russophone come from diverse contexts such as Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Furthermore, it's worth mentioning that for Ukrainian users, their language use was found to be fluid, as indicated by their later videos transitioning to exclusively Ukrainian or a combination of Ukrainian and English in their TikTok content.

### **Imperial Myth/Digital Loop**

Focused on regional specificity, this chapter engages in discussions situated at the confluence of memory studies, digital studies, and

cultural analysis, particularly exemplified by the networked and contested memory practices of the Great Patriotic War on TikTok.

The construction of collective memories of the past serves as a means of societal constitution in the present (Worby and Ally 2013: 463), delineating boundaries between imagined communities and reshaping solidarities (Rothberg 2009; Assmann and Conrad 2010) and involving processes of both remembering and forgetting (Connerton 2008), wherein certain elements of historical events are accentuated or omitted. Hence, cultural memory is conceived here not as a static narrative but as a dynamic cultural and social practice (Swidler and Ardit 1994), entangled in its form and content with digital technologies. Conversely, the interplay between grassroots practices and overarching discourses and memory politics, resonant with the *Beautiful Faraway* trend, necessitates examination, both in a general sense and with a focus on regional specificities.

The term „Great Patriotic War” (GPW) originates from Soviet historiography, denoting the Soviet Union's involvement in World War II as part of the anti-Nazi coalition against the Third Reich and its allies. This narrative predominantly emphasizes the period from 1941 to 1945, marked by Hitler's invasion of the USSR, often glossing over earlier collaboration between the USSR and Hitler in Europe (Khromeychuk 2022). Bearing this in mind, throughout this text, I reference the Great Patriotic War as such—a discourse and myth imbued with self-congratulatory sentiment.

As emphasized by Fedor et al. in their introduction to „War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus” (2017), the enduring prominence of World War II in the national narratives of these countries is unsurprising, given the experienced extensive suffering; endured human losses, infrastructural destruction, repressions under

two occupational regimes, mass murder, deportations, and ethnic cleansings, leading to the region being labeled „Bloodlands” alongside Poland (Snyder 2010). This collective experience fostered resonance with the triumphalist Great Patriotic War narrative of the joint effort in victory over Nazi Germany which contributed to shaping the supranational community of the “Soviet people” (Brunstedt 2011), and of notion of unity and “brotherhood” (Yekelchik 2020) -- which included also Kazakh SSR. Today, authoritarian state of Kazakhstan, is one of the few Central Asian republics that continues to celebrate 9<sup>th</sup> of May (Zhanbosinova 2021).

As noted by Suslov and Bodin (2020), the theme of World War II, particularly in its Great Patriotic War form, has garnered significantly more media attention in Russia since the 60th anniversary of the Nazi defeat in 2005. This increased attention has corresponded with a notable rise in prominence for Victory Day celebrations. In 2007, for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a military parade featured three distinct elements: infantry, armored vehicles, and air forces. Furthermore, in 2011, approximately 20,000 military personnel participated in the parade, marking a record in post-Soviet Russian history (53).

Since then, the Russian myth surrounding the Great Patriotic War has only intensified, particularly with Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. This period has been described as a „conservative turn” both in terms of discourse and policy (Makarychev 2018). In addition to official ceremonies and military parades, there has been a rise in what is referred to as „Victory Day frenzy” or „victory hysteria” (pobedobesie, see: Schuler 2021). This has led to the rise of a revanchist discourse, encapsulated in the slogan „We can do it again” (Mozhem povtorit), contrasting sharply with the commemorative



mantra „Never again.” Furthermore, under the „Foreign Agent” Law, the human rights organization Memorial, which investigated human rights abuses during the Soviet regime, has been dissolved by the Moscow City Court. This action of the oppressive Russian state aligns with earlier Soviet policies that suppressed not only the traumatic memories of the war but also the unacknowledged Stalinist repressions (Etkind 2013).

In another authoritarian regime, Belarus, the firmly entrenched Soviet war myth, supported by the Lukashenka regime, encounters increasing opposition from intellectuals who, nonetheless, are largely marginalized from state-controlled platforms (Fedor et al. 2017, 9) and vulnerable due to regime’s repressions. Both in Belarus and Ukraine, the narrative of „common victory” and „shared sacrifice” has been co-opted by pro-Russian political factions.

Nonetheless, the situation differs in Ukraine where, since the Euromaidan revolution, significant social demand, exemplified by Leninopad (the widespread phenomenon of destroying Lenin's statues across Ukraine), and state policies such as the Decommunization Laws, have fueled the de-Sovietization process. Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk (2019) characterize this process as decolonizing. Ukraine has embraced the Westernized mnemonic community through its adoption of the reconciliatory „Never again” narrative. This is exemplified by the extension of May celebrations to two days: May 8th is designated as a day of memory and reconciliation, and May 9th as the day of victory in World War II (not the Great Patriotic War) over Nazism (ibid: 710).

In April 2015, the Ukrainian parliament outlawed the term „Great Patriotic War” as well as Nazi and communist symbols, street names, and monuments. As of the time of writing this chapter, the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the World War II, now

renamed, hosts exhibitions and artistic responses to the Russian full-scale invasion. These include projects such as a „Threat from the sky,” a warning about the danger posed to Ukrainians by Russian drones targeting defense forces and civilian objects, and „Praying for the Army,” about those “bringing God's word to the frontlines since 2014” (museum website). The museum, whose name is a result of the decommunization (or decolonization) struggle, exemplifies not only another aspect of today's Russia's neocolonial desire, but also performs a sort of time-travel, by contextualizing the present Russian aggression through World War II memory.

The contextualization of one war through another, albeit in a distinct manner, forms a part of the strategy employed by the Putinist regime, drawing upon both Soviet and imperial narratives, including the victory over Nazism, to assert Russia's „greatness” (Platt and Brandenberger 2006) and to justify its colonial wars today. Within Russian propaganda and state-aligned culture, the memory of the Great Patriotic War functions as a reservoir of cultural motifs, continuously resurfacing and contributing to the creation of a symbolic framework that links disparate historical episodes (Oushakine 2009, 83). This mythic portrayal of temporal dynamics depicts Russia as the perpetual „savior,” engaged in an ongoing struggle against what is now labeled „Ukrainian fascism” or the „anti-Russian conspiracy” of the „collective West.” The strategic utilization of historical myths and conspiracy theories by the Kremlin during the Russo-Ukrainian war illustrates the operation of conspiratorial memory.

The mnemonic practices of the Great Patriotic War on TikTok are not only closely tied to the platform's characteristics, steeped in the culture of virality driven by algorithms, but are also inherently linked to broader state-stimulated contexts, and vice versa. This relationship

should not be conceptualized as merely oscillating between top-down and bottom-up dynamics, as multiple actors are involved. Instead, adopting the approach proposed by Noordenbos and Tuters (in pub.) characterizing the power/agency relationship in the context of Russian „WarToks” as „ambient,” it involves resonance, vibing, and tuning-in, rather than a straightforward top-down imposition of state memory politics onto mnemonic practices on TikTok. This perspective aids in comprehending the crucial role of technology in the creative and playful construction of memory and historical narratives, encompassing the interests of the state(s), the agency of content creators, and the influence of opaque algorithms.

As highlighted by media scholar Joanne Garde-Hansen regarding online media and memory, a new hybrid form of memories emerges, blending public and private elements and being creatively constructed (Garde-Hansen 2011, 12). This hybridity encompasses both state-stimulated memory politics and individual practices, resulting in a „third space” where narratives of the Great Patriotic War intersect, clash, resonate, and mutate. History is depicted as a repetitive cycle, resembling a TikTok video endlessly replayed—a looped video, meme-template, and memory-inspired scenarios that continuously manifest anew, shedding an intriguing light on digital memory.

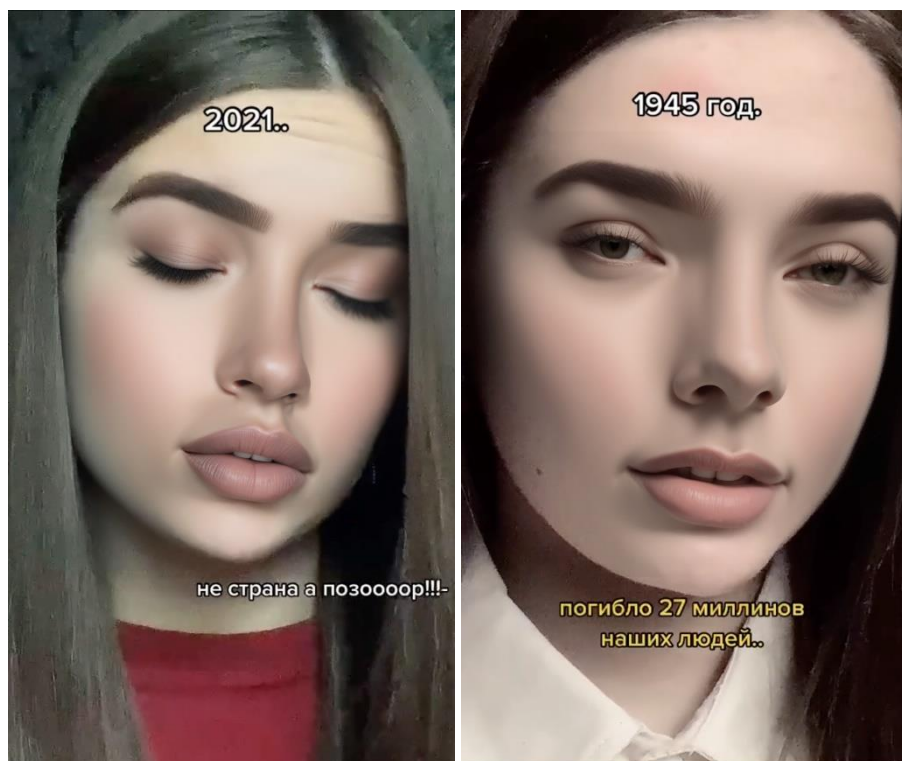
This chapter delves into the unexpected tensions within the intersecting realms of mnemonic and memetic templates, particularly evident in the polarized landscape of the Beautiful Faraway 9th of May-related trend. Here, memory is viewed as a practice, involving both individual and intrinsically social and networked dimensions, utilizing culture-specific symbols, myths, rituals, and narratives not only to foster memory but also to comment on the present. In the realm of

TikTok, a platform characterized by its profit-oriented mechanisms, attention-driven economy, and pervasive algorithmic impact, the intersection of mnemonic and memetic frameworks symbolically embodies the nuanced interplay between public and private memory dynamics, as well as state and individual commemorative practices. In the case study of memory practices surrounding the Tiananmen Square Massacre on TikTok, Seet and Tandoc (2023) referred to such entanglement as „re-meme-bering”. This process, facilitated by the platform's affordances, shapes the expression of Great Patriotic War memory in a specific Beautiful Faraway viral format, allowing for imaginative remixes and reinterpretations of the meme, to which we will now turn.

### **Time-travellers thank you for the safe sky**

The videos in the dataset can be classified into two temporal dynamics, which I have termed „time-traveling”: those depicting travel within the past, such as from 1940 to 1945, and those portraying travel from the present to the past, like from 2021 to 1945. For this analysis, my primary focus is on videos that contextualize the past through the lens of the present (and vice versa), hence, the latter group. Let's now explore an example of such a video, shared by a Russian user named Valya (name changed), known for posting lip-sync videos to Russian rap songs using beauty filters. Despite her content appearing somewhat generic and the videos lacking refined quality, they still manage to attract significant engagement (2.5 million followers), which appears as potentially artificially inflated. While Valya typically shares videos related to relationships, beauty, or the everyday life of a young girl, occasional posts touch upon themes of Russian state or patriotism. Examples include a video commemorating „Gazprom Day,”

a video challenge with ambiguous support for those safeguarding the „safe sky of Russia,” and the one we will be discussing next.



[Fig.1] [Fig.2]

A young girl with long lashes and makeup, popular within broadly understood social media beauty trends, applies lip gloss and engages in an imagined conversation with her peers, the topic of the conversation is “life in Russia” (Fig.1). The dialogical character is implied by text appearing (and disappearing) in the frame, accompanied by emojis deployed to better convey a message reflecting the viewpoints of Russian youth today. The upper edge of the frame is embellished with a year indicator – 2021.

The text messages include: „Omg, where am I living? (facepalm emoji)”, „God, it is so dirty in here!! (puking emoji)”, „It’s not a country, it’s a shame”, „I wish I could move from here faster”. A girl in the video stops applying makeup and, with an ironic grimace, replies: „Hahaha, we live in Russia. What were your expectations? (crying laughing emoji)”.

This segment of the video features an unaltered rendition of the song *Beautiful Faraway*. The message conveyed in the initial part of the TikTok is clear: Russian youth in 2021 exhibit a lack of appreciation for their nation. Their sentiments are articulated not just verbally but also through semiotic modes such as crying/laughing or puking emoticons, commonly utilized communication tools in digital spaces, which may also be interpreted as crude or vulgar. The girl's facial expression—a derisive smile—further underscores the youths' disenchanted attitude towards their country.

The music changes to a dark-hearted version of *Beautiful Faraway*, accentuating the dramatic message. The same girl, with her facial muscles relaxed and wearing a white shirt buttoned to the neck, appears gentler and humbler (Fig.2). This time, the upper edge of the frame indicates the year 1945. Visibly moved, the girl says, „Four years... twenty-seven millions of our people have died... ours is the victory, we did it!” (Russian flag emoticon).

Who is the girl in the second video? Is she Valya, born early enough to know the horrors of the World War II, or her present self who jumped to 1945 to experience it firsthand? Regardless of the answer, the *Beautiful Faraway* trend fosters an intriguing temporal dynamic we can term time-traveling – moving between different periods. This dynamic is further thickened by the medium's affordance; looping videos so that history repeats itself as long as

viewers engage with it. This aspect adds to the mix the crucial element of attention economy inherent in platforms like TikTok (Abidin 2021). Participation in viral trends, using popular sound clips, and appropriate hashtags increases the likelihood of high engagement with the content. Thus, it's no surprise that a video commemorating Victory Day, exploring themes of pride, patriotism, and human suffering, became popular among Russophone audiences in May 2021. As demonstrated in an article by Noordenbos and Tuters (in pub) on mentioned before ambient propaganda, the platform's algorithm appears to favour content related to war and the Great Patriotic War.



[Fig.3] [Fig.4]

The human cost, suffering, and sacrifice of those who fought in the Great Patriotic War serve as a moral counterweight to (presumably unthoughtfully) critical stances of the younger generation. Here, the contrasting relation between the first and second parts of the video morally counters such critical approaches, which could be seen as “unpatriotic.” The second part of the video, with its pitched-down dramatic chorus from the popular song, highlights the sacrifice of „our” older generation (millions of victims) and their selfless fight that contributed to “our victory.” The collective effort of people from the Soviet Republics, especially from today’s Ukraine and Belarus, is unmentioned and framed as Russian: “ours is the victory, we did it! (Russian flag emoticon)”. Such a framing corresponds with the centrality of the Great Patriotic War myth in official efforts to create modern „patriotic” Russian identity (Platt 2019) and contributes to what I call a mnemonic imperialism.

A similar temporal and moralizing dynamics are evident in the video of another Russian TikToker, referred to as „Leon,” whose typical content focuses on his (male) attractiveness and acting skills. In this video, a trio of teenage boys, including Leon, engage in a conversation about their plans for the day. One of them remarks, „Guys, it's the 9<sup>th</sup> of May,” prompting another to suggest, „Let's get drunk.” The third boy (Leon) interjects, „It just so happens that my grandfather served in the army.” Following this exchange, the boy stares directly into the camera, and his persona shifts to him dressed in a Red Army-style uniform, dramatically depicted as if covered in simulated blood and dust.





[Fig.5] [Fig.6]

The uniformed boy theatrically conveys mental and physical suffering, featuring actions such as screaming, moaning, and kneeling in a state of desperation. While the original segment of *Beautiful Faraway* is synchronized with the initial moments of the video, accentuating the carefree and youthful disposition of the boys, the latter part is imbued with a sense of drama through the slowed and reverb version. The vibrant and brightly colored present is contrasted with a de-saturated, greyish-toned past, further heightened by the vivid red blood, symbolizing the bodily sacrifice of the boy's ancestor.

The premise of time shifting and the role of the TikTok creator's body/self in this temporal journey can be productively discussed in

relation to a literary and film subgenre popular in Russia, centered on „popadantsy” – accidental time travelers. This subgenre, with its most prominent trend closely connected to the Great Patriotic War, has been discussed by Suslov and Bodin (2020, 52). They explain it as a form of pulp fiction describing the adventures of a modern protagonist, or a group of them, who by chance find themselves in the past (47). The primary characters in these stories typically fall into one of two general categories: an „everyman” or a trained specialist, such as a commando or a historical reenactor (48), with both typically being male. The recurring plotline entails an accidental time traveller finding themselves on a battlefield and, in one way or another, playing a role in defeating Hitler. Regardless of the specific plot, the conclusion invariably leads to victory (52-53), and the heroes learn a valuable lesson that makes them cherish the memory of the Great Patriotic War.

In the realm of film, the GPW popadantsy genre finds its epitome in the „We are from the Future” (2006) TV mini-series. The narrative centers around a group of four young men who embark on a quest to unearth WWII memorabilia with the intention of selling it for profit. Their actions, driven by financial gain, can be interpreted as sacrilege as they exploit historical artifacts for personal benefit. However, during one of their excavations, they unexpectedly traverse a „wormhole” and find themselves transported to a battlefield in 1942. Immersed in the harrowing reality of the Red Army's struggle, these modern-day boys undergo a profound transformation. They not only gain a newfound appreciation for their national identity but also grapple with the sobering human toll of war. This experience prompts a shift in their understanding of history and their own place within it.

In the literary popadantsy genre, „victory is a crucial aspect of self-identification for both writers and readers” (Suslov & Bodin 2020,

53). Similarly, within the context of TikTok, where a contemporary young man's persona transitions to his GPW-era counterpart (potentially portraying his mentioned grandfather who served in the Red Army), the portrayal of sacrifice for victory becomes a simulated experience interwoven with family knowledge and memories of profound suffering. This suffering often remains less visible than the pride aspect promoted in official GPW commemoration ceremonies and the popular culture surrounding this event (Schuler 2021). Furthermore, the statement „As it happens, my grandfather served in the army” is presented in stark moral contrast to the inadequate stance of his friends, who prefer to commemorate the 9<sup>th</sup> of May through revelry. Consequently, both the TikTok practice and the popadantsy genre, besides engaging in memory work that appears to align with state-driven memory politics, also impart a moralizing lesson.

Returning to the video shared by Valya, which prompted this section, it was accompanied by the following description, as extracted by the data scraping tool: „thank you for the safe sky above head...” (accompanied by handshaking and Russian flag emojis). What does this framing imply? Does it suggest that the past victory of the Red Army is responsible for the safety of today's skies in Russia? Are those who safeguard the safety of the Russian state today being equated to Soviet soldiers? Or does it hint at the ongoing „invisible fight” between the „Soviet” (here simplistically understood as „Russian”) and the Otter (the enemy, the Nazi, the „Ukrainian fascist,” the „collective West”), akin to a repeated looped video? These hints, though not exhaustive, collapse the temporal relations of time-traveling. The cyclic, temporal logic inherent in myth—where time is perceived as repeating itself—is intertwined with the messianic myth portraying Soviets/Russians simultaneously as victors and victims of the World War II.

As was briefly mentioned above, the myth of messianism establishes a binary perspective, skilfully exploited by Russian officials and propaganda outlets, insinuating that opposing Soviet or Russian actions is tantamount to supporting fascism or Nazism. This narrative is utilized to justify the „special military operation,” portraying it as a heroic Russian struggle against the perceived threat of Ukrainian „fascism” (Greszta in pub.). In particular, the mnemonic discourse of Putin's administration fosters a self-serving perspective in which Russia consistently emphasizes its historical role in liberating Europe, and more broadly, the world, from the dual influences of Nazism and American-led imperialism. (Noordenbos 2022, 1300-1301).

While some express gratitude for the „safe sky,” others participated in the *Beautiful Faraway* Victory Day TikTok trend to draw attention to the fact that their skies are not safe; videos pertaining to the Russo-Ukrainian war will be discussed in the following section.

### **(Dis)Connective Memory**

As was clarified in the discussion on the data selection, the set that serves this paper includes 7 videos created by non-Russia based users, among them 4 from Kazakhstan, 2 from Ukraine and 1 from Belarus, which might be seen as an expression of the current resonance of the Great Patriotic War mythology and, of course, the popularity of the given TikTok trend. Herein, as in the section before, I will focus on the videos that include time-travel that includes the present-day context.

Similar to Valya's presence on TikTok, we will now discuss a *Beautiful Faraway* video by a Ukrainian TikToker, using the anonymized name Ivanna. Ivanna, like Valya, predominantly posts videos featuring her face and upper body, often employing beauty filters, with content centred around romantic relationships and beauty

trends. Despite being similarly generic and of comparable quality, Ivanna's account is significantly less popular, with fewer than 6000 followers. Although her regular videos typically receive a few thousand views, the „Beautiful Faraway” video garnered almost 1 million views for her, thereby affirming the observation that Great Patriotic War-related videos were, at least at some point, favoured by the algorithm.



[Fig.7] [Fig.8]

In fact, Ivanna created two videos related to Victory Day and utilizing the same soundscape, but the second one was not included in the dataset due to engagement count (less than 62300 likes). Similar to Valya, since 2022, Ivanna occasionally posts politically charged videos; but in this case: expressing her Ukrainian nationality, the

suffering caused by Russian aggression, and her anti-war stance. She also incorporates hashtags such as #stopthewar and Ukrainian flag emojis. Although the *Beautiful Faraway* video, like all others in the dataset, is in the Russian language, Ivanna predominantly uses English and Ukrainian in her current videos. Such tendencies in performing national identities online have been visible and discussed in the post-Euromaidan context since 2014 (Kulyk 2016), with the digital realm serving as a space for the negotiation of ethnic, national, and linguistic identities, particularly in light of the Russo-Ukrainian war (Kozachenko 2021). Nonetheless, let's now focus on her TikTok posted on the 9th of May 2021.

Following the *Beautiful Faraway* meme structure, the video's narrative unfolds in two distinct parts. The initial segment, labelled with the year 1945 positioned at the upper part of the frame, features a young woman adorned in a greenish, uniform-like attire, her face bearing traces of dust and bruises. Despite her evident exhaustion, her weary eyes convey a sense of satisfaction as she gently smiles. She holds a child, as implied by her hand movements, wrapped in a white shawl. Overlaying this scene is text in Russian: „We have won; now our kids will not know what war is.” The unaltered rendition of *Beautiful Faraway* serves as the background soundtrack, enhancing the hopeful, uplifting, and relieving atmosphere that accompanies the end of wartime horrors. By denoting „we,” Ivanna subscribes to the Soviet/collective effort in the war.

The presence of the new generation symbolizes the promise of happiness and the expectation that they won't have to endure the hell of military conflict. The narrative then undergoes a quick dip-to-black transition, accentuated by a manipulated version of the song. This shift

serves to emphasize a sense of disenchantment. The future turns out to be less beautiful and, unfortunately, not free from wars.

In the second part, the same girl wears a simple black blouse, a colour associated with mourning attire. She weeps and wails, with her eyes once again engaging with the camera. The visual is framed by two indicators – the top one denotes the year 2014, and the lower one states „Donbass,” using the double „s” at the end, adhering to Russian spelling.

In contrast to her counterpart in the dataset, Valya, Ivanna embarks on a journey through time from the past to the present, a temporal relation akin to „reverse popadantsy,” which is also imbued with a moral message. Along the way, her attire transforms from its initial state to mourning black, unlike the humble white shirt depicted in the Russian TikTok.

Inspired by the call for a „connective turn” in memory studies (Hoskins 2011), scholars have examined connective memory within digital platforms like Facebook (van Dijck 2016) and Twitter (McCammon 2022). Van Dijck describes it as a shift from a social networking site to a tool for shaping personal and social memory (151), while McCammon showcases Twitter's potential as „a rich and ephemeral memory site, wherein digital objects collide and provoke different forms of memory-making practices among diverse actors” (3914).

Although McCammon's concept is closer to the dynamic observed in the case at hand, it differs significantly. The connective features of the algorithm-driven TikTok platform not only link users who may not follow each other (via the „for you” page) but, specifically in the case of *Beautiful Faraway*, users consciously connect by participating in the same viral trend, utilizing the (Soviet-inspired)

cultural memory of the Great Patriotic War for various purposes—thus navigating between the connective and disconnective aspects of the trend. As writes Canning (2004, 230) in the context of feminist historiographies, performativity of the embodied memory actively places the past in the community context of the present time. In the TikTok video, the alternation between the present and the past serves to contextualize contemporary life with past sacrifices, and vice versa. In this dynamic, gesture, emotion, visual representation, etc., emerge not only as essential facets of subjective experience (as often seen, for example, in in-person historical reenactment events), but also as instruments of intra-subjective communication within the TikTok platform.

The pronounced facial expressions in all TikToks analysed herein, but especially in their second parts, are integral to the „playfulness” specific to this platform (Vijay et al. 2021). As highlighted by Sánchez-Querubín et al. (2023), the rhetorical power of playfulness, exaggeration, and dramatization are prevalent, rather than peripheral, practices on TikTok (200). Furthermore, as proposed by Agnew (2004), suffering is an integral element in various forms of reenactment and can serve as a means to embody „ressentimentful victimhood” (Kazlauskaitė 2022). Solidarities, including those rooted in memory, frequently originate from profound negative emotions, functioning as cohesive forces within communities.

In this context, the challenge to the Great Patriotic War myth does not present itself as an anti-GPW or anti-Russian narrative. Instead, it adopts the same (Russian) language and terminology commonly used in GPW-related TikToks. This video actively engages with the emotional significance of GPW memory practices while simultaneously highlighting the fragility of the memory framework



presented in the previous section - the idea that the current Russian generation enjoys a carefree life because of the sacrifices made by the „Soviet people” during the GPW. The reminder here is that the present is far from carefree; it is once again marked by violent conflict, and the Soviet victory cannot be solely attributed to the Russian war effort.

While Ivanna references the Russo-Ukrainian war in its pre-2022, territorially limited phase, there are other videos within the dataset that explicitly contextualize the memory of the Great Patriotic War with the current full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, imbuing it with moral significance.

One such video was posted by a popular TikTok house (a group of influencers residing and collaborating, typically in a spacious villa, to produce video content together) hailing from Kazakhstan. Despite the group's sizable following of over 2 million, due to the interconnected nature of the *Beautiful Faraway* trend, wherein all participants are linked through the „sonic hashtag,” the actual name of the group will be anonymized with a fictional name, Khouse. In fact, Khouse uploaded a video following this trend twice: first in May 2021, becoming the second most popular video in the dataset with over 5.5 million views, and then in May 2022, garnering lower engagement but still meeting the dataset's criteria. While both videos focus on time-travel from the past to the present, spanning from 1939 through 1945 to 2021/2022, I will concentrate on the second one, which repurposed some clips from the 2021 video.

Two boys, dressed in white shirts and red scarves reminiscent of the iconic Soviet pioneer uniform, share laughter as they sprint towards a destination beyond the frame. Bathed in the glow of a sunny day, their joy is captured in an untarnished rendition of *Beautiful Faraway*, showcasing a tender moment between friends, and

highlighting a hopeful message about the promising, mysterious future. Digits displayed within the frame indicate the year 1939. As the melody transitions into a slow-reverbed rendition, the frame shifts to 1941, unveiling the two boys still in motion, now clad in military uniforms, one of them wounded, covered in dust and blood as they desperately flee from what appears to be a battlefield. The latter is rather conventionally suggested, as the viewer can discern contemporary Soviet blocs in the background.



[Fig.9] [Fig.10]

The dark-toned colour grading enhances the stark contrast between this scene and the preceding one. Significantly diverging from typical videos within the trend, this one introduces an additional

dimension of time travel, transporting us to the present day (2022). What sets it apart further is the concluding scene, which portrays an individual not present in the preceding scenes—an elderly man who meets the viewer's gaze. He is dressed in a uniform adorned with multiple Soviet badges. Suddenly, his gaze shifts beyond the frame, prompting the camera to reveal his focus: a television screen broadcasting live news updates, depicting presumably Russian tanks and soldiers during a Victory Day parade. The question on the TV screen arises: „What will change if the Russian Federation officially announces war on Ukraine?”



[Fig.11] [Fig.12]

As revealed in the video posted by Khaus in 2021, parts of which were utilized in the 2022 version, the elderly man embodies the older self of one of the boys from the initial scenes of the TikTok. In the 2021 video, rather than gazing at a TV screen, he contemplates a photograph of himself and his comrade on a sunny, carefree day in 1939—emphasizing the human cost and sacrifice of youth and friendship in wartime efforts. Therefore, in the 2022 rendition, the moral charge may be perceived as transitioning into the question: „What will happen if...” Far from being a straightforward anti-war statement, this question nevertheless delves deeper into the political. The Russian aggression is potentially framed as a war (as opposed to a „Special Military Operation”), and an alternative interpretation raises another question: What do those who fought for the „collective” and „our” victory during the World War II think about the current reframing of Russia (the crystallized epitome of the Soviet) not as a defender but as an aggressor? Such a question resonates with sentiments expressed by segments of the Russophone publics commenting on the Khaus video, stating: „Our grandparents didn't fight for such a future!”

Here, again, the intertwined process of remembering and forgetting is intrinsically tied to the myth of the Great Patriotic War. The portrayal of carefree youth is assigned to 1939, yet this overlooks the reality that the war had already begun, with the USSR collaborating with Hitler in Europe (Khromeychuk 2022).

What is noteworthy in the Khaus video, and similar to many videos within the trend, is the focus on time-traveling within the past, such as the journey from 1939 to 1945. This narrative often revolves around pioneers or graduating students envisioning their bright futures on the last day of school. However, the heavy and distorted version of the song presents a starkly different reality, portraying these

hopeful youths transformed into soldiers and paramedics, covered in blood and shattered by the horrors of war. In this way, a memory of the personal sacrifice of an entire generation is enacted and disseminated.

As the Eastern Front of World War II began on June 22, 1941, this date coincided with what is often termed „the last school bell.” The memory of „lost youth” seems to echo not only in the *Beautiful Faraway* videos but also in the discussions within the comment sections. A Russian user, commenting on one of the videos in the dataset, wrote: „On this day, graduates had their last school day...!!!!”

Reiteration of such sentiment can be also found in institutions like The State Museum of the Defense of Moscow, which in 2020 introduced a virtual exhibition titled „The last school bell in 1941: they left without fulfilling their dreams.” According to their website, „The exhibition tells the story of the pre-war years and the generation of that time, about the lifestyle of Soviet schoolchildren, and also vividly recreates the date of June 21, 1941. The exhibition includes items belonging to students of the USSR: notebooks, diaries, inkwells, paintings (...)” Indeed, the fascination with those who ventured to the frontlines on the brink of adulthood dovetails with the dual nature of the nostalgia-infused readings and reinterpretations of the *Beautiful Faraway* song, as seen on platforms like TikTok. *Beautiful Faraway* evokes an awe of the future (and past), which is both mysterious, exciting and cruel.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter delved into a trend that emerged on Russophone TikTok in May 2021, involving the merging of a distorted rendition of the song *Beautiful Faraway* with content pertaining to the Great Patriotic War. Specifically, I examined videos created by users from Russia, Ukraine,

and Kazakhstan, which employed a „time-traveling” convention to delineate moral distinctions between the past sacrifices of youth contributing to „our,” „common” victory, and the present day. The latter showcased through various scenarios, such as carefree youth in Russia, young women enduring hardships in war-torn Donbas, and the unease of a Red Army veteran in Kazakhstan facing a news coverage on the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

All these videos drew upon similar memetic (viral trend scheme on a highly networked and algorithm-driven platform) and mnemonic templates (stemming from Soviet historiography), participating in a practice of „re-meme-bering”. This practice resonates between reinforcing the myth of the Great Patriotic War and challenging it. The past is contextualized within the present, and vice versa, as exemplified by discussions on „popadantsy” and „reverse popadantsy” moral lessons and temporal dynamics. All that connected through the audial hashtag – the distorted version of the *Beautiful Faraway*, popular song from a TV series *Guest from the Future* which was too, about time time-traveling school kids in pioneer-like attire, akin to those presented in the TikTok videos.



**[Fig.13** *Guest from the Future* (1984), last scene. *Beautiful Faraway* sounds until the end of the closing credits.]

As noted by Maria Yavorskaya (2019), the characters in the series found themselves traveling between a disappearing Soviet past and an uncertain future. The closing scene of *Guest from the Future*, in which Alisa, the time traveller from the 2070s, leaves her 1970s

comrades, is a poignant and thought-provoking moment in the series. While the Moscow school kids are visibly sad and some even weep as their friend from the future disappears in the time machine, Alisa herself appears to be quite different in her demeanour. She wears a gentle smile on her face as she confidently marches into the time machine and vanishes into a bright whiteness. This contrast in emotions raises questions about the symbolism and the message conveyed in this scene.

The continuous presence of the *Beautiful Faraway* song throughout this scene adds depth to the emotional atmosphere. While Alisa departs, the song may be seen as a representation of her journey towards a brighter and better future. However, the situation is quite different for her friends from the past, who are left in what appears to be a dusty, war-torn-like basement. As the time machine closes in front of them, the ending takes on a somewhat sombre tone, and the song, unintentionally or not, takes on an ironic quality. It raises the question: is the door to the wondrous future now sealed shut for good?

A foretaste of disappointment and disillusion seems to be conveyed. This metaphorical interpretation permeates various cultural artifacts that encounter and reinterpret the iconic song. Beneath videos featuring popular interpretations of the song, one may encounter emotionally charged responses, framing it as a requiem for the Soviet Union or as an anthem of a wondrous future that never came to fruition. For instance, a comment reads: 'Previously, while listening to this song, I envisioned a wondrous future. Now, I am certain the song reflects the wondrous past. Unfortunately.' (accompanied by a sad emoji, with 2.3K likes). It seems that a similar sentiment has seeped into the Great Patriotic War trend analysed in this chapter – *Beautiful Faraway* never manifested.

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## **6      Understanding the Trauma and Evil of the 2023 Hamas Attacks on Israel Via Online Behavior and Media**

*Eric D. Miller*

The question of how online imagery can be utilized to study the senseless violence and evil of the Holocaust was an issue that I recently examined (Miller 2017). In this paper, I considered the possible duality of such images in terms of how they may be perceived by others. To many, they help to illuminate the trauma and depravity displayed in the Holocaust against Jews and others; in doing so, they may also allow for greater compassion and empathy towards the victims of this genocide. However, as with any form of social media content, such imagery can also be used or manipulated to deny the Holocaust or denigrate Holocaust victims, survivors, or other groups (more generally) including (but not limited to) Jews.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and related military factions launched attacks against Israel from Gaza that led to the greatest loss of civilian life since its founding in 1948 and is widely viewed as the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust (Patt and Steir-Livny 2023). While this incursion was ongoing, countless images and videos of individuals being killed or captured were widely circulated online; these images also potentially served the purpose of further humiliating victims or desensitizing others to such imagery (Horn 2023). In

addition, reports of sexual violence against women have been particularly highlighted with an emphasis on the point that several women's rights organizations at least initially remained muted about such attacks thereby potentially accentuating feelings of disenfranchised grief (Chotiner 2023). Many of these online images and spaces have also had significant "offline" cultural consequences including (but not limited to) an outcry against the barbarism of these acts or, paradoxically, a wider condemnation of larger Israeli policies regarding the Palestinian territories.

Both historical and contemporary events have revealed that individuals can react to seemingly violent and disturbing imagery in a variety of ways—many of these reactions in and of themselves could be construed as being quite troublesome. For instance, Campbell (2004) discusses how photographs showing lynchings from the Jim Crow era of American history are extremely disturbing to view and provide painful evidence of racial hatred and violence from this time; yet, when these photographs were taken, they were often done in a celebratory atmosphere. Consider a trio of more contemporary events: the COVID-19 pandemic (and the backlash against viral mitigation strategies), the January 6, 2021 U.S. Capitol attacks, and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. In all of these cases, there were individuals who abhorred both of the latter attacks as well as the often-aggressive backlash against COVID-era policies (such as mask wearing and remote schooling) that were often laced with bigoted or prejudicial ideologies. Conversely, there are those who embraced such images as well (Miller 2023).

Consistent with the aforesaid point, psychologists have long appreciated that how we experience events, such as stress, often has a subjective quality to it (e.g., Lazarus and Folkman 1984); for instance,

an event that one individual may view as stressful may not necessarily be construed the same way by another. In developing a definition of major loss, Harvey and Miller (1998) also argued that experiences of loss will have a subjective evaluation but there should also be a seemingly objective appreciation by knowledgeable others about the nature of the loss as well. In my own research (Miller 2015, 2019), I have shown how aspects of trauma and evil can be categorized as shown with respect to the use of coding systems in select YouTube videos.

Concepts such as evil can be extremely difficult to conceptualize due to a myriad of theoretical and methodological issues (e.g., Berkowitz 1999; Friedrichs 2000). However, this line of research has shown even if YouTube users may hold differing views about the Holocaust, 9/11, mass shootings, or other traumatic events, it is possible to develop coding systems where independent raters can objectively evaluate and assess the nature of select comments via content analysis. For instance, in one study (Miller 2019), a YouTube comment was deemed to indicate the presence of “evil” in terms of interpreting a video on the Holocaust or other select traumatic events if a given user said (or implied) as much or considered the event to be “wrong” or “sick.” In another study (Miller 2015), YouTube comments from the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting were judged to feature greater compassion and expressed grief in contrast to other select tragic events from around that same time period. It is important to stress that in making codes, here again, there were objective parameters utilized to determine (for instance) the presence of grief or compassion.

This point further highlights how various digital spaces will continue to impact both subjective views and objective analyses of the

Israel-Hamas crisis including perceptions of trauma and evil. For instance, the well-known slogan “From the river to the sea” is often invoked by pro-Palestinian supporters as a call to end Israeli-military rule over Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank; however, many Jews interpret such sentiment as an existential threat meant to provide for Israel’s destruction (Kellman 2023). To be clear, this is not at all to suggest that those who have questioned or even protested against the military actions by Israel against Hamas since the October 7 are inherently suspect or laced with antisemitic sentiment. However, it is indeed worth noting that both antisemitic incidents within the U.S. and online have dramatically increased since the October 7 attacks (Chavez 2024; Or-El 2024).

Antisemitism often features many seemingly disparate and contradictory qualities such as endorsing views that Jews are both (depending on the situational context) supportive of communist or capitalist ideals (e.g., Cohen et al. 2009). Antisemitism can also be embraced both by both right-wing extremists (who often use social media to perpetuate hateful ideology and related conspiratorial thinking; Allington and Joshi 2020) and those on the left where such sentiments are often prevalent on college campuses (e.g., Elman 2020). Several incidents underscored the impact of the latter dynamic post-October 7 including both less supportive attitudes towards Israel amongst young adults (e.g., Generation Z; Villasmil 2023) and the highly controversial Congressional testimony from three leading Ivy League presidents as to whether students should necessarily be disciplined if they called for the genocide of Jews (e.g., Saul and Hartocollis 2023).

It will take some time to understand the larger societal, political, and cultural impact that the Hamas attacks and subsequent

war hold for Israel, the Palestinians, and the world. But, on the first International Holocaust Remembrance Day since the attacks, many Jews have again been reminded of life's fragility and a realization that the horrors and hatred of the past, sadly, do not remain in the past—in fact, it has even led to a questioning of whether we have entered into a new and more ominous phase of being for Jews, in particular (DeRose 2024). Consistent with the broader themes of this paper, post-October 7, 2023, regardless of one's creed, nationality, or background, if we place conditions on acknowledging and trying to ameliorate one's suffering or pain, or cannot objectively appreciate such reactions as such, then this truly would be a very troubling development throughout many spheres of society.

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## **Part III**

### **Narratives of Cultural Shift and Identity**

#### **Construction**

## 7      **The Hyperlocal Global Skepticism Age**

*Ruby Thelot*

“How do I know that a Deus deceptor of utmost power and cunning has not employed all his energies in order to deceive me?” This is the question that French philosopher Rene Descartes begs to himself in his treatise “Meditations on First Philosophy, in which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated”. In the text, the philosopher undergoes a radical re-evaluation of all the things that surround him: the objects, the chair beneath him, the world that surrounds him. How does he know that what he is seeing is true? He supposes that an omnipotent evil demon, the aforementioned “Deus deceptor”, could be fathomed to create for its subject a total illusory experience of the world. He writes, “I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things.” (Descartes 1641)

This skepticism, which Descartes, called “tabula rasa” or “clean slate”, was a way for him to ascertain his beliefs, to arrive at philosophical conclusions on truth and knowledge. Modern individuals rarely go to such lengths: we have come to accept most of the things around us as “default real”. In the arena of modern visual culture, most people are familiar with image manipulation and can surmise, by context, when an image has been altered through digital image

manipulation tools such as Photoshop. Consumers of visual media are also familiar with the high performance of visual effects software in the realm of cinema and video games. The progression from the visual effects in the first Star Wars movie to the current fully rendered environments of the Mandalorian are a great example of the technological advancements traced over a single media franchise.

That media, however, is consumed in the context of entertainment, where it is understood to be fictional. New image manipulation and generation technologies powered by artificial intelligence are seeping from the world of fiction and are now encroaching onto reality. Recently, artificially generated images of the Pope, Donald Trump and Taylor Swift made the rounds on social media, with many viewers unable to identify that the images were fake. Many of these images are deepfakes, or “content generated by an artificial intelligence” manipulated to simulate the likeness of an individual (Mirsky & Lee, 2020). This confusion is happening more frequently and at an accelerated pace, which is pushing viewers of visual content to change their stance on images encountered outside of the realm of entertainment. Whereas previously, images and videos may have been presumed to be default real, they will soon be presumed to be default fake. I call this new epoch of our hypermediated era, “Hyperlocal Global Skepticism”.

By Hyperlocal Global Skepticism, I mean the growing global distrust in visual media and the subsequent impact of the retreat into hyperlocal modes of epistemology.

This chapter focuses on the genealogy and potential impact of this new era, dissecting its effects through secondary research, theoretical investigation, and case study analysis. What happens when we no longer trust the media around us?

## **The Rise of Mediated Realities**

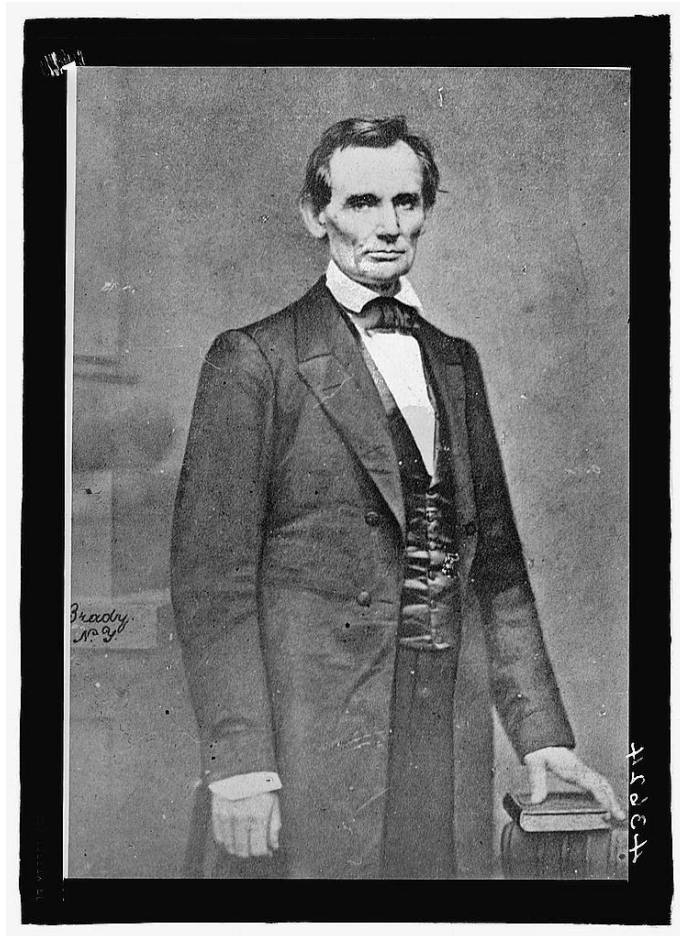
“Seeing is believing”

Though the idiom serving as an epigraph for this section may appear self-explanatory, it elucidates one of the central tensions in the mediation of relation. Greek philosophers such as Aristotle relate sight to our capacity to access reality. In “Metaphysics”, he writes “For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.” (Aristotle XXX) The verb to “know” and to “see” in Greek are connected etymologically to the root “eido”, which can be used to signify both (Thayer 1997). We have often associated sight with knowledge. This turn towards the visual is accentuated by its promise when mediated, i.e., representation.

Approximately 73,000 years ago, early inhabitants of present-day Blombos, South Africa, applied scarlet ochre to stones and etched ladder-like patterns, dots, and hand impressions onto the expansive walls of caves to illustrate their surroundings (Nelson & Wilkison 2015). These pictorial representations are mimetic in nature, meaning they replicate the natural world. Aristotle regarded such images as simulations capable of eliciting emotional reactions from viewers as they recognize themselves or their experiences within these depictions, whether real or imaginary. In his 1983 work „Towards a Philosophy of Photography,” Flusser delivers a compelling critique of imagery. He argues that the link between the creator and the image fades after its creation, describing this phenomenon as a form of amnesia. According to Flusser, humans forget that they crafted these images as tools for



navigating the world, leading to a situation where imagination morphs into illusion. He posits that there is a common misunderstanding of images, seeing them as direct reflections of reality („screens”) rather than as simplified guides or models („maps”) (Flusser 1983). This confusion, he suggests, results in a diminished capacity for critical thinking regarding images.



**[Fig.1** Portrait of Lincoln by Mathew Brady showing early signs of photographic alterations. Source: Library of Congress.]

### Early examples of image manipulation

The image, given its perceived “screeness”, develops a trust with its viewer, an aura of reality. Through this trust, it becomes the perfect site for manipulation. The issue which is detailed in this paper is not reserved to the modern technologies such as AI-generated images and deepfakes. Rumors abound on whether Abraham Lincoln and his campaign engaged in early forms of photo manipulation (Farid 2006). The first case study of this paper is the case of image manipulation in Soviet Russia, as detailed by David King in his book, “The Commissar Vanishes”.



**[Fig.2** Portraits of Septimius Severus, Julia Domna, and their sons Caracalla and Geta. Geta's face has been removed after Caracalla called for a „damnatio memoriae” of Geta after his death. Source: Wikimedia.]

The text offers a fascinating and unsettling exploration into the use of image manipulation under Joseph Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union, highlighting the ways in which the Soviet government altered photographs as a means to rewrite history and exert control over the public's perception of reality. It delves into the meticulous process through which individuals who fell out of favor with Stalin were erased from photographs and, symbolically, from Soviet history itself. This practice is an example of “*damnatio memoriae*”, Latin for “Condemnation of Memory”, or the intentional deletion of individuals from public records and imagery.



**[Fig.3** Nikolai Yezhov with Stalin along the Volga Dam. Source: Wikimedia.]

This process of image manipulation involved physically removing the undesired figures from photographs, either by airbrushing them out or by cutting and reassembling the images to

exclude them. The aim was to make it as if these individuals had never existed or had never been part of key historical moments. Such alterations were not limited to removing people; in some cases, backgrounds and other elements were also altered to suit the narrative the regime wished to promote. This practice was part of a larger strategy of censorship and historical revisionism, where texts, photographs, and even state records were altered or destroyed to align with Stalin's current policies and to eliminate any trace of opposition or alternative narratives.



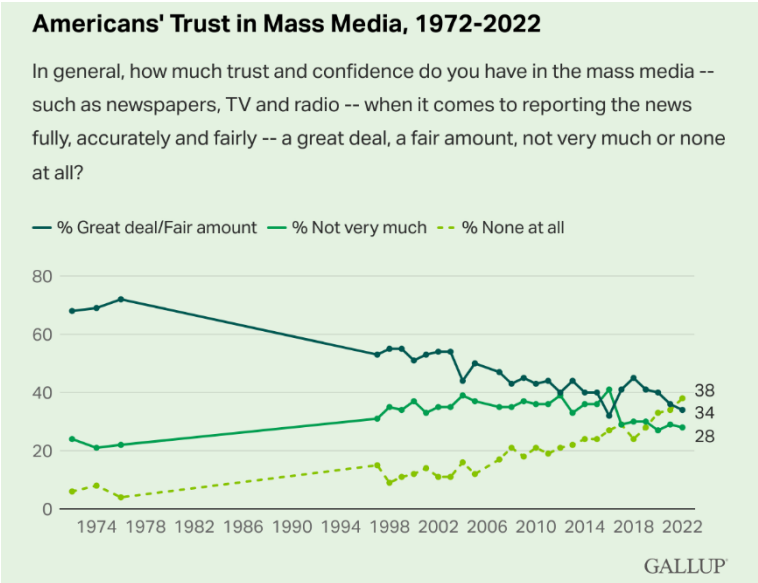
**[Fig.4** Nikolai Yezhov with Stalin along the Volga Dam, altered to remove Yezhov. Source: Wikimedia.]

King's analysis emphasizes the chilling effect of this manipulation on the collective memory and identity of the Soviet people. It illustrates the power of images as tools of propaganda and the lengths to which authoritarian regimes will go to maintain an

illusion of unanimity and infallibility. The book serves as a practical case study of the potential for abuse of power in controlling information and rewriting history through visual media. Through painstaking research and analysis of numerous altered photographs, King sheds light on the dark corners of Soviet history, revealing a world where truth was malleable, and reality was subject to the whims of those in power.

**Loss of Faith in Images**

Media serves not just as a conduit for messages but as an arbiter of reality itself. Friedrich Kittler, the German media theorist, said it best, “Media defines what really is” (Kittler XXXX). These days, the equation is straightforward: if something cannot be verified via Google or substantiated by media outlets, its very existence is questioned. Even media outlets are losing ground in their ability to be trusted by the American public.



**[Fig.5 American Trust in Mass Media, 1972-2022. Source: Gallup.]**

This wasn't always the case. Trust has shifted from the empirical to the representational; reality is increasingly defined by our ability to depict it. As media forms with higher fidelity are introduced—written accounts, images, videos—we not only come to expect them but to equate them with reality itself.

### Media by Order of Fidelity

1. Video
2. Images
3. Audio recording
4. Written account
5. First-hand account
6. Second-hand account
7. Hearsay

This precarious position leads to a new dilemma in the age of deepfakes and AI-generated images: what happens when media fidelity improves to the point where we can produce indistinguishable fakes?

### **Case study: “Balenciaga Pope”**

In March 2023, Twitter user “skyferrori” who goes by “leon” posted an image of Pope Francis, donning a bright white, puffy down-filled jacket in the style of fashion brand Balenciaga. The image, assumed to be real by most, immediately went viral, with an estimated 12 million view on Twitter alone. As mentioned previously, context matters a lot in the interpretation of the veracity of an image. First, in the context of social media, one can expect that a user may be in the vicinity of the pope during one of his widely attended public engagements. Second, the pope is also known to wear idiosyncratic religious garments, thus the

puffer is not too far removed from the range of expected style. Third, the image renders the Pope's with high accuracy, capturing the details of the hair, the reflection of light in his glasses and even wrinkles and veins.



**[Fig.6 Ai-Generated Pope. Source: Skyferrori.]**

Looking at the left corner of the image, the more astute observers, noted the lack of definition in the fingers, the strange visual artifacts around the object he is holding, amongst other tell-tale signs that the image was merely synthetic media. The comments surrounding the image however resound with the general imperceptibility of these details and the overwhelming initial belief that the image was indeed real. Celebrities such as Chrissy Teigen even

opined on their own gullibility, ironic considering her involvement in the image industry and potentially her familiarity with image manipulation.

This phenomenon is reflective of the hyper-mediated environment that envelopes our daily lives, where the sheer fidelity of digital representations can often supplant critical analysis and skepticism.

The incident serves to highlight the pervasive readiness to accept high-definition media as a facsimile of reality—a condition exacerbated by the prevalence of AI-generated content and deepfakes that continually test the boundaries of verisimilitude. The public's inclination to believe that the images were real without immediate verification is indicative of a broader shift in the epistemological landscape. While the global community has become increasingly wary of representational media, suggesting a rational defense mechanism against the potential corruption of our digital reality, there remains an undercurrent of vulnerability to the convincing nature of such representations.

This susceptibility to accept the digitally mediated as real underscores a paradox within „Hyperlocal Global Skepticism” itself. While there is a growing distrust in the mediated, the sophistication and persuasive power of contemporary media production techniques can sometimes bypass these defenses, leading to a reflexive acceptance of the imagery presented. As such, the scandal not only illuminated the intricacies of interpreting modern media but also the fragility of the global audience's trust—trust that is continually negotiated and recalibrated in the face of ever-evolving digital landscapes.

In conclusion, the ease with which the public assumed the controversial images to be genuine is a microcosm of the delicate



balance between skepticism and credulity. The „Balenciaga pope” not only challenges individuals to discern the real from the represented but also serves as a harbinger for the deeper epistemological shifts that are defining our understanding of reality in the twenty-first century.

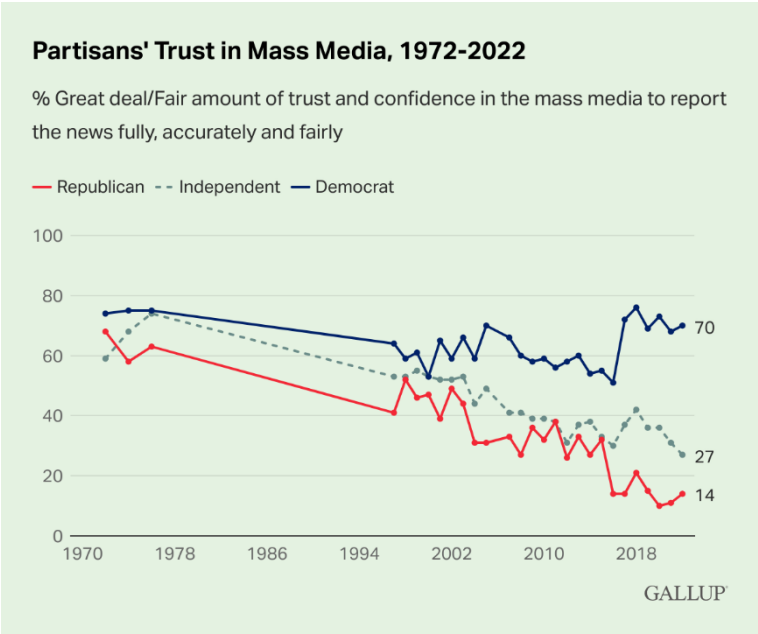
### **Case Study: Trump Arrest**

If “Balenciaga Pope” was an example of rapid dissemination of a synthetic image in the world of fashion and culture, the similar “Trump Arrest” images signal the potential future consequences of AI-generated images in the world of politics. In the political arena, the consequences are not memes but elections, policy and geopolitical decisions. As trust in media wanes in certain areas of the American population, constituents seek alternate sources of information outside of mainstream media. These sources often do not undergo the same rigorous fact-checking process that the legally liable national news outlet abide by.

This opens an opportunity for nefarious actors to influence the informationally underserved constituents through misinformation enhanced by AI-generated images. Whereas, previously, a headline with no references or images may have been dismissed, webpages spreading misinformation can garner trust by presenting synthetic images as proof of a false headline.

Already, we have encountered instances of artificial intelligence used for political misinformation. In Slovakia’s 2023 election, two days before the vote, a fake audio recording was leaked to the public where one of the party leaders can be heard discussing his plan to rig the vote. Two days is not enough for the mainstream media to prove the recording is fake, and, even if it was, the task of undoing the harm such a viral drop is herculean. The audio was planted cunningly during the

48-hour moratorium ahead of the polls that media outlets and politicians in Slovakia observe. An element of human psychology plays in the efficacy of synthetic media: confirmation bias (Ciampaglia & Menczer 2018). In this case, people who opposed the candidate have a vested interest in believing that the recording is real and if they fall in the aforementioned “low trust in mass media” group, they may disregard the media-approved message and opt to believe whoever posted the fake recording instead.



[Fig.7 Partisans' Trust in Mass Media, 1972-2022.]

As AI-generated media proliferates, we should expect not only to encounter similar attempts at falsely representing reality, but also its inverse „False Positive Reality.” This term encapsulates the emerging phenomenon where the veracity of even genuine content is subjected to doubt, a trend amplified by the prevalence of convincingly doctored visuals. This skepticism is further entrenched by the human

predisposition known as confirmation bias, where individuals are prone to embrace information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and to disregard data that contradicts them. It shapes the way information is sought, interpreted, and remembered, influencing collective decision-making and fostering an environment where misinformation can flourish unchecked.



**[Fig.8 AI-Generated Images of Trump's Arrest. Generated through Midjourney by Eliot Higgins. Source: Twitter.]**

The notion of „Hyperlocal Global Skepticism” becomes particularly salient in this context, as it describes a societal pivot towards localized, interpersonal sources of information over globally disseminated, and often impersonal, media. These smaller sources

themselves may subject to the infiltration of “deepfakes” and other artificial media.

The example in this case are the viral images of Trump’s arrest, an event that never occurred. The incident evidences a crisis where the lines between actual events and fabricated realities become perilously obscured by the sophistication of technology.

AI-generated images have the potential to exploit confirmation bias, manipulating perceptions on a mass scale. The concocted images of a political figure's arrest, for instance, can swiftly permeate through communities, accepted as truth by those whose beliefs are affirmed by the false narrative. This dynamic exacerbates the challenge of cultivating a well-informed electorate, as it hampers the collective ability to engage in critical analysis and to recognize the „False Positive Reality” that such images propagate. In such a landscape, even when presented with factual information, the public may remain skeptical, questioning the authenticity of true events as much as the fabricated ones.

The impact of AI-generated images on politics is profound, as they challenge the very notion of truth in the public arena. The capacity for these images to be weaponized as tools of misinformation necessitates a critical approach to media consumption. As society grapples with these challenges, the need for media literacy and a robust, critical public discourse becomes increasingly apparent. It is only through such collective effort that the public can navigate the complexities of a political reality in which artificial images may appear undeniably real, and real events may be dismissed as falsehoods.

Therefore, in the face of AI's capacity to create indistinguishable falsehoods, „Hyperlocal Global Skepticism” may emerge not just as a defense mechanism but also as a necessary adaptation for navigating

the murky waters of digital-age politics. It urges a reevaluation of the sources we deem trustworthy and compels us to confront the intrinsic limitations and susceptibilities of our technologies and cognitive biases. The intersection of AI, confirmation bias, and political imagery thus not only reflects the current state of our informational ecosystem but also signals the imperative for a more discerning and critically engaged citizenry.

## **Conclusion**

When we reach a point where such images are indistinguishable from reality, it raises the unsettling question: what defines reality when a New York Times headline and a substack op-ed present conflicting versions, both supported by equally compelling visual media? This creates a wave of „Skepticism,” leading to what I term „False Positive Reality.” In this state, our pervasive skepticism makes us doubt even the real in favor of the hyperreal—reality becomes another casualty in the endless war between the real and the represented.

This conundrum reaches its pinnacle in our Post-Truth World (Thelot 2023), where the McLuhan Tetrad might suggest that older modes of testimony could make a resurgence. If high-fidelity media can be faked, then the only bulwark against falsehood could be an almost anachronistic return to the 'eyewitness,' to a mutual trust born out of interpersonal relationships rather than mediated ones.

The logical conclusion is a society marked by what I call „Hyperlocal Global Skepticism,” where the value of visual media is significantly diminished in favor of immediate, local, mutual-born experiences. In this scenario, presence and eyewitness accounts are elevated, while videos, pictures, and even journalism are sidelined. This has profound implications for how we navigate the future, trust

one another, and understand our place in this interconnected yet isolating digital milieu.

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## 8 The Da Vinci Code

A postpartum of Y2k

*Cru Encarnação*

From the manuscript of my lecture *Dissociative Methods of Sound in Performance* for DICE-Festival:

“I don't care about the explanation. I don't care if these are spirits, if this is a UFO, if it's a conspiracy, if this is a natural phenomenon. I don't want to understand them. I want observe what scary things they do to the audience, their ability to change people's minds about the pillars of reality. We need that swift cognitive shift, not in a specific direction though. We need the abandonment and complete destruction of what we think we know. A complete state of epistemic apocalypse. How do we perform these tricks?”

This text, more than a review, is a *reaction* to *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown (2004). It has two main goals: 1) to articulate the interests of The Cursed Assembly<sup>4</sup> with regard to the text & 2) to articulate a connection between this book and the “Y2K period”.

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<sup>4</sup> The Cursed Assembly is a collective based between Berlin and Porto, founded and facilitated by me and Odete. The collective works on the topics of archival practices, authorship, History, Science and Magic.

## **What we remember**

The bubble gum glittery pink blow-up couches spread over a landscape of experimental interior design, with see-through surfaces and molten glass walls. A girl answers her messages on a *Motorolla* flip-phone. *Myspace* emos with straightened hair look directly into the camera, doing a ‘v’ with their index and middle finger. Music videos of unknown places with glossy-metallic scenographies where the band’s singer seductively talks to us through the camera. *Bravo* magazine covers are piled up in the corner of the room, collecting the data of an aesthetic archive of teenage gendered fashion. White girls with cornrows dance in front of the camera to the sound of an *Evax* commercial and boys tape their *GTA* posters to the wall. Television is always on, but there is only one remote control.

As a late millennial, my memory of the time period between 1997 and 2004 is mostly felt. I absorbed these years, intensely, and mostly pre-verbally and hyper-sensorially. It’s this weirdly stored memory, which enmeshes nostalgia, bodily sensation and what is retroactively revived.

I would dare say that the term ‘Y2K’ has been increasingly used in my social circles over the last 5 years. And when I hear this abbreviation, I automatically get pulled into the kind of landscape described above. Especially in fashion, design and visual art, we see Y2K being used to refer to an early stage of our generation—a premature interaction with technology, a globalised economy and complex communication networks. When we observe it retroactively, it’s nostalgic, as it represents the hope, energy and ambition of a digitised world that would later decline in the late 2010s, when the

political potential of commercialised technology and the internet failed to provide us a socialist dream for liberation.



In these aesthetic revival contexts, Y2K represents a moment of illusion and delusion – with all concomitant positives and negatives – which comes into crisis. As all things that become ‘vintage’, it is a ruin-like collective emotional state. When people now talk about Y2K it’s always with a tone of nostalgia because we now know none of those dreams come true. I am aware this dream-like portrayal of the concept of Y2K is deeply tied to the (current) fashion, music and visual arts scenes. The point of this text, however, is to highlight another aspect of the concept. While this ‘vintage’ retroactive vision of Y2K holds so much energy, optimism, (unhinged) grooviness and so on, the “Y2K” I will be talking about is permeated by fear, anxiety, hopelessness, paranoia and delirium.

## **The End**

My interest in eschatology is similar to my interests in speculation. They’re both significant distortions of the present which allow us to enter a concealed realm of the collective psyche.

In 2021, I invited Natalie Mariko to give a lecture on eschatology for a project I did with K,K (Berlin). By exploring (non-biblical) depictions of the apocalypse (but also apocalypse-motivated actions like the doomsday cults of Ōmu Shinrikyō and Heaven’s Gate) she taught me that eschatology as depictions of ‘the end of the world’ help us understand a group of people through their anxieties and fears, in the same way that science fiction supplies us with socio-political questions posed by the establishment of science and technology. The premise of an ‘End’ usually imports two main questions: 1) what causes the end?; 2) is there something *after*? The first question manufactures a scapegoat. The second reinforces the patterns of

behaviour which are supposed to be (re)enacted; it describes what people should do before the end arrives. While the first one works negatively and the second positively, both exist to control collective behaviour by shaping a prediction of the future.

A great example of this can be found in Jota Mombaça's body of work, and its constant reminder that depictions of the apocalypse are always depictions of 'one' apocalypse—the one of the hegemonic world. More often than not eschatology consists in the exploitation of marginalisation into an aesthetic which shocks privilege. In this way, it serves as a means to scare privilege-holding communities and further estrange them from the marginalised ones, promoting the intractability of societal stratification. This 'apocalypse' depicted as the end of the world for cis white rich people from the global north is the continuous reality for black trans people of the global south.

I would say eschatology is a subcategory of speculation, one that specifically points towards collective fears, anxieties and notions of control/chaos. We can never emphasise enough the fact that even though these fears, anxieties and notions of control are collective, they are of a *situated* collectivity. Mediated depictions of the apocalypse are an eschatology of privilege-holding groups.

In *Apocalypse in American Literature and Culture*, John Hay writes, "[the] 'American Dream' has not only imagined the prospect of material prosperity; it has also imagined the end of the world." The End gains a utilitarian position in collective epistemologies. A 'lid' that shapes the present. A 'firmament' to our reality.





## **Time bomb and archival crisis**

If a depiction of the apocalypse or the end times tell us so much about the people who envision it and their present state, then a failed prediction of the apocalypse tells us even more. The world was supposed to end (for some) in the year 2000. But it did not. What do we make of this?

In the late 1990s, databases started experiencing storage problems. Since hardware was still quite expensive, information referring to specific years would be stored only with the last two digits of every year number (1976 = 76, 1943 = 43, 1999 = 99). Problems started popping up when things had to be stored for any year after 1999. Since only two digits could be used, 2003 would appear the same as 1903 and 2000 the same as 1900. Especially in the United States of America, this glitch unleashed a massive panic fuelled by the idea this archival disorganisation would affect banks, energy supply, supermarkets, etc. The computer bug causing this problem became known as the Y2K bug (Year 2000 bug).

Here is a list of literature produced in this time period:

- *Surviving the Computer Time Bomb: How to Prepare for and Recover from the Y2K Explosion* (Minda Zetlin, 1999)
- *GURPS Y2K: The Countdown to Armageddon* (compiled by Sean M. Punch, 1999)
- *Y2K: It's Not Too Late - Complete Preparedness Guide* (Scott Marks, Karl Kaufman, Patrice Kaufman, 1999)
- *Y2K. It's Already too Late* (Jason Kelly, 1998)
- *Time Bomb 2000* (Edward Yourdon & Jennifer Yourdon, 1997)

- *Millenium Meltdown: Spiritual and Practical Strategies to Survive Y2K* (Grant R. Jeffrey, 1998)
- *Y2K Citizen's Action Guide: Preparing Yourself, Your Family, and Your Neighbourhood for the Year 2000 Computer Problem and Beyond* (Eric Utne, 1998)
- *Y2K: How to Protect Your Family in the Quiet Crisis* (Todd Phillips, Darren McMaster, 1998)
- *The Y2K Personal Survival Guide: Everything You Need to Know to Get from This Side of the Crisis to the Other* (Michael S. Hyatt, 1999)
- *Deadline Y2K* (Mark Joseph, 1999)
- *The Y2K Survival Guide and Cookbook* (Dorothy R. Bates, Albert K. Bates, 1999)
- *Y2K: A Reasoned Response to Mass Hysteria* (David Hunt, 1999)
- *Y2K Family Survival Guide: A Complete Action Manual for Your Y2K Lifeboat* (Avian M. Rogers, 1999)
- *Y2K: The Day the World Shut Down* (Michael Hyatt, George Grant, 1998)
- *Glitch - The Y2K Conspiracy* (David Kedson)

While writing this text, I found a project called *Computers in Crisis* ([https:// www.computersincrisis.com/](https://www.computersincrisis.com/)), which has gathered many of the books related to this time period. and I recommend a visit to their very solid database to further expand on this theme. What started with a small numerical and digital glitch soon enough created a fertile soil for all kinds of apocalyptic narrations, conspiracy theories and doomsday cults.



Most of these books are practical guides and just a few are novels. Many of the authors listed have been connected with the Christian Church, conspiracy theories and other doomsday practices. The one thing they all share is that every single one of them is white and US-American. We are talking about a very specific apocalypse panic here. The one of the hegemonic mediated world: the comfortable world white US-American boomers exported around the globe as the ultimate state of prosperity and success. We're talking about an apocalyptic panic of the digitised world, with informational apparatuses on the way to an ever-widening, bio-politically sharp network of surveillance, extractivist, colonial and capitalist *dispositifs*.

The documentary “Y2K: Tensions in the Last Days of the 1900s”, produced in the last 4 months of 1999, depicts people gearing up for the year 2000, getting survival camping-type of gadgets and developing elaborate stockpiling plans for life amidst the apocalypse.



[Images from left to right: a man in his basement with giant milk containers; countdown to 2000; store for survival supplies.]

While it was and is ultimately not quite transparent to the common citizen if all these areas of economy would have been affected by the bug, strong measures were taken economically to prevent the dreaded catastrophe. According to the “Official Report of the United States Senate’s Special Committee on the Year 2000 Technology Problem”, the US government spent around 100 billion dollars alone in prevention measures—most of which consisted in creating

amendments to (archival) software in order to make them “Y2K compliant”.

There were a few hundreds of reported glitches deriving from the bug after midnight of the 1st of January, 2000. Some examples that can be found in Wikipedia are quite amusing: a baby born in Denmark on January 1st was registered as being 100 years old; a German bank transferred 12 million Deutsche Mark to a customer; some taximeters in China failed at midnight; Visa and Mastercard charged some customers multiple times for transactions. From the report mentioned above, we also read that “[examples] of domestic problems have included Medicare payment delays, [...] degradation of a spy satellite system, 911 problems in several localities, and a nuclear weapons plant system anomaly. International events included non-safety-related problems at a nuclear power plant, a Hong Kong Futures Exchange outage, and a variety of biomedical device glitches.”

But, all in all, the world did not end (unfortunately). Was it due to the measures taken? Or was it an exaggerated prediction of future unfolding? We can’t know for sure, but from this situation we can see the fear and panic deep-seeded in US-American and (its adjacent) western culture.

The Y2K bug reveals the double-edged sword we created for ourselves in organising time numerically. It is the formal attribute of the digit which traps us into our own representationalist creations. It is a symbol, but it also materially occupies space—physically and visually.

The number represents a strictness with which we have compromised ourselves but failed to put into use because it does not fully fit the fleeting complexity of human reality.

And these numbers become not only estranged from us but also quick triggers for ‘The End’, as if our lives were being held by a thread

which simultaneously threatens us and ensures our safety and well-being. Twisted, right?

Karen Barad so famously formulates the fragility of human representationalism thus:

“[The] belief that representations serve a mediating function between knower and known [...] positions us above or outside the world we allegedly reflect on. [...] Representationalism takes the notion of separation as foundational. It separates the world into the ontologically disjunct domains of words and things, leaving itself with the dilemma of their linkage such that knowledge is possible. If words are untethered from the material world, how do representations gain a foothold?”

This cavity between the symbol and the represented subject becomes the main problem. For one second, we fail to work with the numerical logic we’ve created to organise the world and, because giving in and putting this organization into question is undesirable, the end of the world is declared.

There are two options: 1) either we complete the mission to plan, organise and archive things as (we think) they should be; or 2) we can’t and we will die because, since we can’t control them, they will take control of us.

In a way, it’s also a Frankenstein-type creation, one that has fled from our control and whose intentions have sundered from our own moral compass. They might rebel against the hyper-controlled purposes we have assigned to them and *they will kill us*.

And, for the purpose of this discussion, ‘they ’means this cryptic and premature amalgamate of numbers, archives and computers which characterises the late 90s and early 2000s. Our monstrous creation, entrusted with one of the most severe tasks we could invent—the organization of reality.

Assuming the Y2K-span to be from roughly 1997 to 2004 (with the foreplay and outcome of the year 2000), we are talking about a time period inaugurated by the death of Princess Diana, which witnesses the cultural reception of the *Blair Witch Project*, the political impact of 9/11 and the manufacture of the notion of ‘terrorism’, as well as the first instances of social media and internet commercialization (*Myspace* founded in 2003 and *hi5* in 2004). The scattered subject of 90s post- modernism is also quite encouraging of suspicious and hypercritical world views, building an epistemological situation more sceptical of authority and the top-down ‘truth’.

We were ergonomically, emotionally, intellectually not equipped for the amount of information to come and the turn of the millennium, this arbitrary countdown, made us even more scared.

There is a brilliant video essay by YouTube user unlimited called “The 2000’s Aesthetic That You Definitely Recognize | Frutiger Aero”. The author of this video eloquently describes the aesthetic of Frutiger Aero (~2005-2010s), something I regard as a *response* to Y2K.

Frutiger Aero attempted to provide a user-friendly interface for a time when most people were still not very familiarised with the digital. The aesthetic is characterised by skeuomorphism (digital objects that resemble physical objects; think about *Apple’s* calculator or compass app) and humanism (a strong presence of humans). According to unlimited’s convincing point, this was a stage of interface

design where people needed these reality-emulating designs in order to transition to a more abstract and minimalistic digital interface (2010s). Something to mitigate the fear of numbers, computers and the digitised world.

Even though some reports of small glitches can be traced, the year 2000 did not unleash anything close to the apocalyptic visions predicted by the many wincing cis white men. Nevertheless, it represents a decisive moment in the history of eschatology. This ‘retaliation of numbers’ has created a generous historical period, supplying a wider disproving of socially-constructed meaning, of the hegemonic reality and the normalisation of our fallibility as a knowledge-seeking species—some of whom claim to know it all. A fragile reality unveiled.

Remembering Mariko’s lecture, the Apocalypse in the Bible is described in the Book of Revelations as a moment of disclosure and *revelation*. The end of what was recognised as ‘being’ reveals that which was ‘not-being’. Facts become supported by all the hidden things. And when the end comes, we understand all the reasons which lead to it and we cannot afford *the time* to hide our most sinister fears and secrets any more. They come up and *they will kill us*, revealing the magic tricks behind our matrix of beliefs.

As someone really dear to me once said, “to decide your death is to decide your life”.

### **A postpartum of riddles, art, anagrams and numbers**

*Odele and I go through post-christmasy Lisbon hunting for the Gioconda-cover of The Da Vinci Code. We constantly bump into the newest cover with steampunk-*

*alluring elements like locks and mechanisms over a red background. The obsession to get the Gioconda: it's only because it's her opening the portal of destruction. She is the epitome of white European Art & Science. If it's her who is opening the doors to the scam, then the scam is not only a scam, but an apocalypse.*

### **Why not before?**

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, published in 2004, has sold millions. By 2006 it was made into a Hollywood blockbuster. The Cursed Assembly was intrigued by the book's cultural phenomena and popularity and felt an intuitive link to our research.

*The Da Vinci Code* is a real truth-questioning book that has operated *socially* through challenging the boundaries of the novel. *The Da Vinci Code*, beyond literary value, has to be analysed as a cultural happening. It is the cultural para-textual object of the book which is worth tackling in order to be understood as part of this Y2K truth-crisis.

With this text I want to articulate a similarity between the archival crisis of the Y2K and the socio- cultural reception of *The Da Vinci Code*, while explicitly discarding an analysis of a supposed 'literary quality'.

In the BBC Timeshift documentary, *The Da Vinci Code: The Greatest Story Ever Sold*, a priest declares, "more people are reading the *Da Vinci Code* than the Scriptures and the Gospels and therefore many people are being introduced to the Church and to Christianity through *The Da Vinci Code*."

In 1982, a book entitled *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, written by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, was brought to market. The book poses a similar thesis as *The Da Vinci Code* about the secrets behind the origins of Christianity, the story of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and humanising Jesus Christ into a husband and a father.

This same book is referenced in *The Da Vinci Code* in chapter 60: “Here is perhaps the best-known tome, Teabing said, pulling a tattered hardcover from the stack and handing it to her. The cover read: HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL The Acclaimed International Bestseller. Sophie glanced up. „An international bestseller? I've never heard of it.” You were young. This caused quite a stir back in the nineteen eighties. To my taste, the author made some dubious leaps of faith in their analysis, but their fundamental premise is sound, and to their credit, they finally brought the idea of Christ's bloodline into the mainstream.”

Prior to and leading up to that had been the 70s BBC series *Chronicle*, presented first by Henry Lincoln alone and then in cooperation with Richard Leigh. Henry Lincoln – not famous for being an historian but as the screenwriter of *Dr Who* – gathered the necessary information that would later feed into the story of the Priory of Sion featured in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and in *The Da Vinci Code*. Lincoln presents us the legal proof of the registration of a society called the “Priory of Sion” in 1956. From this point, the story unfolds backwards until 1099 in Jerusalem, its supposed foundation. A list of celebrities ranging from Isaac Newton to Jean Cocteau,

Boticelli and – of course – Leonardo Da Vinci are presented as members of this secret society, whose function throughout the centuries has been to follow Jesus 'lineage to find the right moment to reveal the true history of Christianity. *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was definitely a provocation in its time, but nothing comparable to what we would later witness with Brown's novel.

Laura Miller writes in The New York Times about *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*: "The authors spin one gossamer strand of conjecture over another, forming a web dense enough to create the illusion of solidity. Though bogus, it's an impressive piece of work."

Back to 2004. After *The Da Vinci Code*'s major success, two authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (Baigent and Leigh) filed a court case against Dan Brown for plagiarism.

Even though *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* is referred to in the book and despite the suspicion for mysterious anagrams making reference to the authors through the character of Leigh Teabing (Baigent = anagram for Teabing; Leigh = reference to Richard Leigh; also the character is British, like the authors involved in the *Chronicle* series), Baigent and Leigh did not feel they had received proper credit in the story and that too many of their ideas were being used in *The Da Vinci Code*.

„I don't think the patronising, slightly comic, slightly sinister figure of Leigh Teabing constitutes an acknowledgement. [...] For the uninitiated reader, the book [*The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*] could be fictitious", declares Richard Leigh in the BBC documentary.

The genre-bending and conceptual landscape of these books is extremely similar, yet *The Da Vinci Code* has managed to receive much more attention than *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*.



This discrepancy of cultural impact has to do with the difference between the truth-crisis at the turn of the millennium (highly susceptible to conspiracy, mystery and a sort of ‘end of the world’ aesthetics) and the Thatcherite/Reaganomics era of the 80s (a decade of prosperity for white boomer culture). The 80s were not a time permeable to this kind of narrative and literary intervention.

Y2K initiated intense ontological deconstructions of the world in general, as well as of the exported white US-American capitalist culture — much in the same way 9/11 changed the scope of transnational politics *because it happened in the US*. Not only the Y2K bug, but also *The Da Vinci Code* are both products of US-Americanism which have the power to affect a broader epistemology because they are ‘apocalyptic’ events taking place at the hegemonic centre.

We see Mona Lisa as a central figure here because she is at the centre of European Art History, as the epitome of Art and Science within this cultural territory. When we understand she hides so many secrets, then we know for sure that so much of what we were forced to know and believe is an illusion because she led the construction of our world. And in the cis-white-male-European *modus operandi*, the reformulation of reality is not possible because it is pure weakness. And so, we’re only left with the end of the world. Cliché to quote, but “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Capitalism”.

### **Neo-eschatology**

The look into European Art History in the book is an estranged look because it is a US-American look. Even if it is the point of view of an adjacent power structure, suddenly we observe Europe not as the supposed ‘womb of civilisation’, but a map full of lies, secrets and continuous manipulations of the capital-T Truth according to political

expediency—aesthetically, historically, religiously. The book creates an intellectual ecosystem of conspiracy-aesthetics. Not only in the story, but also to the public—something that resonates with The Cursed Assembly. We like to read books that have emanated beyond themselves and seeded the soil with dangerous, destructive ideas, literary objects that become *epistemologically apocalyptic*.

The 24-hour adventure of Robert Langdon – an academic specialised in Symbolology and Art History – and Sophie Neveau – a cryptographer and granddaughter of the recently killed head of the Priory of Sion, Jacques Saunière – is a quest for an immaterial treasure. The ‘Holy Grail’ here liquefies the sacred cup into the blood and the blood into the paper. It is an informational treasure that is as desired as it is feared. It is *INTENSE* information which, like nuclear warfare, is kept to withhold power, but the actual use of which would be apocalyptic. This *INTENSE* information has the potential to destroy centuries of knowledge and power held by the Church. But also the danger of such an immaterial artefact is that the immateriality which opposes it has been in constructive dialogue with the material architecture of bodies, cities, technology and society. Beyond the institution of the Church, this treasure is a threat to the institution of Truth itself. It is *epistemologically apocalyptic*.

Just as with Y2K, there is no middle-term. All is connected. If numbers don’t work anymore, everything will fail. If the story of Jesus is a lie, everything is a lie. The basic keystones of the hegemonic world are suddenly tipped over and we see a whole universe collapse in front of us, a fragile construction which can only make destruction itself into an erotic, sadomasochistic process of revelation, an orgasmic release of the compressed and repressed epistemic objects never before felt.

## Numbers have bodies

In *The Da Vinci Code*, the appearance of numbers like the appearance of names and lists is reminiscent of the use of enumeration in the Bible. One example is in the Old Testament. You find all these lists of people belonging to the same lineage and their ages. And when reading it one asks, why? Why so many numbers and names and how can people be 120+ years old? The list becomes a rhetorical device, one that is used not for literary purposes, but for real epistemic ones. Also, incredible how the word ‘and’ appears again and again in the Bible. ‘And’ implies an addition of something else. The biblical story becomes a list of ‘facts’, operating in the same way we see in *The Da Vinci Code* and how Henry Lincoln convinced us when he first broadcast the list of members of the Priory of Sion in *Chronicle* —a list that would later be found in the 79th chapter of *The Da Vinci Code*.

101 Marie de St.Clair	- 1220 - 1266	JEANNE I	71 - Gu
111 Guillaume de Gisors	- 1266 - 1307	JEAN II	81 - Ro
121 Edouard de Bar	- 1307 - 1336	— II	91 - Nu
131 Jeanne de Bar	- 1336 - 1351	JEANNE II	101 - Th
141 Jean de St.Clair	- 1351 - 1366	JEAN V	111 - Te
151 Blanche d'Evreux	- 1366 - 1398	JEANNE III	121 - Ja
161 Nicolas Flamel	- 1398 - 1418	JEAN VI	131 - Ad
171 René d'Anjou (A)	- 1418 - 1480	— VII	En 1281, Ad
181 Roland de Bar	- 1480 - 1483	JEANNE II	nes de cette
191 Sandro Filipepi	- 1483 - 1510	JEAN III	Née à St Léon
201 Léonard de Vinci	- 1510 - 1519	— II	en Sicile où
211 Connétable de Bourbon	- 1519 - 1527	— I	Charge de la
221 Ferdinand de Gonzague	- 1527 - 1575	— II	Sion fut con
231 Louis de Nevers	- 1575 - 1595	— III	d'Orléans, le
241 Robert Fludd	- 1595 - 1637	— IIII	maître des c
251 J.Valentin Andréa	- 1637 - 1654	— IIII	Maisons de
261 Robert Boyle	- 1654 - 1691	— IV	à cette époqu
271 Isaac Newton	- 1691 - 1727	— VII	lées plus la
281 Charles Radclyffe	- 1727 - 1746	— VIII	transférée à
291 Charles de Lorraine	- 1746 - 1780	— VIII	aucun biete
301 Maximilien de Lorraine	- 1780 - 1801	— IX	
311 Charles Nodier	- 1801 - 1844	— IX	
321 Victor Hugo	- 1844 - 1885	— XII	En 1481, l'om.cj

One can see a certain similarity between these two types of lists which merges fact with belief. Numbers become connected to God and Truth. Their space on the page creates an aesthetic of sacredness. They stamp marks on the overwhelming and immaterial void of time. The

specificity of these numbers makes you think, “If someone wrote this, then it must be true, because this is so specific”. We trust numbers to give us access to the natural world, as if their idiosyncratic incomprehensibility would generate belief and respect.

*16 And these are the names of  
the sons of a Levi according to their  
generations; Gershon, and Kohath,  
and Merari: and the years of the life  
of Levi were an hundred thirty and  
seven years.*

*17 The sons of Gershon; Libni, and  
Shimi, according to their families.*

*18 And the sons of Kohath; Am-  
ram, and Izhar, and Hebron, and  
Uzziel: and the years of the life of  
Kohath were an hundred thirty and  
three years.*

*19 And the sons of a Merari; Mahali  
and Mushi: these are the b families of  
Levi according to their generations.*

*20 And Amram took him Jochebed  
his father's sister to wife; and she  
bare him bAaron and Moses: and  
the years of the life of Amram were  
an hundred and thirty and seven  
years.*

*21 And the sons of Izhar; Korah,  
and Nepheg, and Zichri.*

*22 And the sons of Uzziel; Mishael,  
and Elzaphan, and Zithri.*

*23 And Aaron took him Elisheba,  
daughter of Amminadab, sister of  
Naashon, to wife; and she bare him  
a Nadab, and Abihu, Eleazar, and  
b Ithamar.*

*24 And the sons of Korah; Assir,  
and Elkanah, and Abiasaph: these  
are the families of the Korhites.*

**[EXODUS 6:16–24]**

Without quoting this in full form, I would still refer to the episode in the Bible where Abraham attempts to convince God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He asks God if He would spare the city if he finds 50 righteous men. God says yes, that He would spare the city for the 50 righteous men. So Abraham starts to make this bizarre countdown, from 50, to 45, 40, 30, 20 and 10 righteous men, testing the limits of God's mercy. Until the number 10, God always concedes the survival of Sodom and Gomorrah. We know that didn't happen and He still destroyed them, but for Abraham, as well as for the reader, this frame between 50 and 10 was a good starting point to believe in God's pure and well-meaning intention to seek for the city's salvation.

In chapter 4 of *The Da Vinci Code*, Robert Langdon teaches us the Louvre Pyramid consists of 666 glass panels, something made on purpose to praise Satan. In my second-hand edition of *The Da Vinci Code*, its previous owner underlined this sentence, as well as others which point towards 'facts through numbers'. For example, "Langdon

had once walked the Louvre's entire perimeter, an astonishing three-mile journey. Despite the estimated five days it would take a visitor to properly appreciate the 65,300 pieces of art in this building" (chapter 3). Or, "[the] symbol was known as a *crux gemmata*—a cross bearing thirteen gems" (chapter 4). Or, "[their] ascension to grace was jump-started in 1982" (chapter 7).

These pencil-underlined sentences make me think the previous reader of the book wanted to fact-check some statements. It's interesting they chose mostly sentences where numbers are mentioned. Through numbers, these sentences approach 'fact'.

The use of numbers as a means to access reality is quite predominant in the book. In the way numbers are vehicles for statements to become facts, something similar happens with the Y2K-bug situation. We don't really know what is going on, but numbers fix us to a feeling of 'truth' which is quite intriguing.

They are also the gateway, the key to hidden information. And even though they represent transparent mathematical objectivity, they are used to conceal information and distance us from things we want to comprehend. This idiosyncrasy renders them 'fact' but also hermeticises them, making the represented information more inaccessible.

In *Pythagorean Women*, Sarah B. Pomeroy gives us an insight into the letters exchanged between Pythagorean female philosophers. One of the hot topics in these letters is the lack of emphasis in *perception* within the male-dominated Pythagorean tradition, epistemology and practice.

Aristotelian ethics – which prioritises an applied Ethics and not Ethics merely formulated for the sake of philosophy; that is, in the latter case,

a more Platonic one – and an interest in the experience of musical harmony as the perception of (numerical) proportion both seem to be points connecting the women’s critical view of Pythagorean men.

The branch of Pythagorean philosophy concerned with the more musical translation of mathematics is known as the *akousmatikoi* (“listeners”), which separates from the *mathematikoi* (“learners”). These women seem to be more connected to the former than to the latter.

Many of them are frustrated with the fact that the perception (of numbers) is only used in an early stage of philosophising, merely serving a purpose towards the “acts of pure reasoning” (the more Platonic use of numbers as absolute divine forms). Theano I (Pythagoras’ wife) writes in “On Piety” (ca. 4th-3rd century BC):

“I have learned that many Greeks think Pythagoras said everything is created from number. This statement itself raises a question. How can what does not exist think and reproduce? But he did not say everything is derived from number, but everything is generated according to number, that the primary order is in number. By being part of it [the primary order], a first and second and the rest that follow are the order for things that are counted. The differentiation between “everything comes from number” and “everything is generated according to number” seems to articulate the difference between the number as an absolute prime matter and a number as something that is perceived and on top of which the world is constructed (by humans).”

Ptolemaï's (Neo-Pythagorean) writes later (date):

“Pythagoras and his successors wish to accept perception as a guide for reason at the outset, to provide reason with a spark, as it were; but they treat reason, when it has set out from these beginnings, as working on its own in separation from perception. Hence if the system [systema] discovered by reason in its investigation no longer accords with perception, they do not retrace their steps, but level accusations, saying that perception is going astray, while reason itself has discovered what is correct, and refutes perception.”

Being ultimately invested in the nature of the number as a philosophical subject, Pythagorean women seem to have had an interesting (yet maybe obscured) take on the nature of numbers. It is enthralling for me to think about why Pythagorean women were trying to emphasise perception in opposition to reasoning. It seems to me it could also lead us to questions like: “What do we perceive when we perceive numbers?”; or, “What do numbers refract in a collective psyche?”, like the practical application of numbers as objects of social study and not of abstract reasoning; or, “What do they do with people?” I like to think of numbers as if they would carry bodies. Bodies that we see and react to.

Pomeroy writes: “The Neopythagorean women writers are concerned to work out the normative implications of Pythagorean principles for the actual contexts of human life, including the realities of less-than-ideal social conditions.”

In *The Da Vinci Code*, there is an archive in crisis. And the access to this problem and to the archive itself is through the *form*—numbers,



symbols, art and riddles. This form acquires a body, one that we perceive, interact and respond to. In the same way, the Y2K panic was originated by the formal constraints of numbers.

### **Anagrams - literary illusionism**

The notion of a (possibly misleading) interaction with the formal aspects of knowledge, like numbers or symbols, seems to be further explored through the anagram, a recurring element throughout the book.

„You think this message is... une anagramme?” She stared at him. „Like a word jumble from a newspaper?” (Chapter 20)

When she was young, often her grandfather would use anagram games to hone her English spelling. (Chapter 21)

Langdon nodded. „Gentlemen, not only does the face of Mona Lisa look androgynous, but her name is an anagram of the divine union of male and female. And that, my friends, is Da Vinci's little secret, and the reason for Mona Lisa's knowing smile.” (Chapter 26)

„Rose,” Langdon added, „is also an anagram of Eros, the Greek god of sexual love.” (Chapter 60)

Later, she realized the numbers were also a clue as to how to decipher the other lines—a sequence out of order... a numeric anagram. (Chapter 44)

The anagram shows us at least two sides of a word, sentence or paragraph. These do not vary according to hermeneutical contingencies, but according to the body of the text itself. While interpretation is something ethereal and discursive, the formal

(un)dressing of words through letters is physical and material. While it is much easier to imagine a criticism, or the fallacious nature of an interpretation, it is quite odd to see the solidity of letters shifting to create a different meaning. And while one letter constellation is set, the other will always be hidden. Each of these, as long as it speaks to the reader, also conceals the other 'side' of the story. As each sentence, word or paragraph *states*, its also *lies*. The core principle behind the anagram is a new textual vantage which is not only hermeneutical but somewhat optical. The text becomes a fleshy gimmick which has been disposed physically according to someone's (perhaps misleading, perhaps deceptive) intention.

The moment where one word or sentence shifts is a moment of revelation. It's a perceptual trauma. A performative plot twist of reality through this 'form' or 'body' of text.

In 2022, I gave a lecture entitled *Dissociative Methods of Sound in Performance* for DICE-Festival about performative techniques of reality-questioning and epistemic trauma. For this I dragged inspiration from: Illusionism/Magic Performance; pop-cultural events and viral phenomena like chain messages or "The Dress" (2015) [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_dress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dress)]; scenographic special effects like the Pepper's Ghost Illusion and its use in the Snoop Dogg + 2Pac concert (2012); artistic interventions like Orson Welles' live reading of *The War of the Worlds* (1938), which was apparently so realistic that people thought the Earth was being invaded by aliens; or the first screening of *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1895), where members of the audience left the room in a panic, afraid of being hit by the mere image of a train. I also dove into techniques of lip- sync and instances of dubbing, which result in audiovisual deception.

These performative techniques carve the cognitive apparatus of the audience. The vehicle for these are the formal aspects of the presentation; namely, sound and image. *Media* which become *mediums* (in the sense of people who ‘channel’ (or talk to) spirits) for odd, terrifying or unexpected things. In the same way, we see the anagram being a feint to knowledge production itself. Once we think we have it, we understand what we are actually reading is just a textual mask, a palimpsest with the mere formal function of hiding. The anagram is an acknowledgement of the form. An emancipation of the materiality of numbers and letters from the things they’re supposed to represent. The Platonic power structure shifts to ‘idea over form’ with which the anagram so playfully engages.

Y2K: a panic being unleashed through the sudden consciousness of form (“Oh! These numbers take up space!”). It’s as if negligence of the form would lead to its seeking revenge.

In this sense, the way we deal with text in *The Cursed Assembly* is a hyper-material one. Because the texts we come in contact with are texts that have been marked by their doomed material destiny.

It is extremely important to mention Odete’s piece *Atlântida* presented at the National Theatre in Lisbon in 2022, where we worked together and from which a lot has definitely leaked into *The Cursed Assembly*. The object of the book became quite present throughout the piece. She used tons of old books and it didn’t matter which books, as long as they looked like books. It was about the symbology of this object. We had sex with them, burned them, kissed through them, masturbated them, wounded them with fake blood.

She cuts, copies, glues, staples, shatters, spits, burns and rips text and she erotically does so. That engagement with the text is an

obstinate reminder that text *is that formal object as well*. And many texts that exist now become signified *only* by their formal condition (of being destroyed, of being incomprehensible, etc.).

The anagram as a method of dealing with text refers to this same formal quality of textuality. The body of the text, the shape of the text. And it does so by creating illusions through this form. Without the physical text, the anagram is impossible (I would like to call this *literary illusionism*, but the space to elaborate on this is quite scarce, so I will leave this for now). And without the form of numbers, the catastrophic revelation of Y2K is impossible. Namely, *numbers have bodies*.

### **Against disciplinarian knowledge**

*The Da Vinci Code*'s 'aesthetics of the archive' oscillate constantly between two types of crashing technologies: 1) old and unintelligible manuscripts, like the text inside the cryptex:

*Focusing all his energies, Langdon studied the strange text. [...] After several seconds, he began to feel the initial frustration resurfacing. „Leigh, I just can't seem to place it.” (Chapter 71)*

and 2) slow digital databases, like the one at the library scene in chapter 79:

*As she clicked the SEARCH button, she could feel the hum of the massive mainframe downstairs scanning data at a rate of 500 MB/sec. [...] A few hundred terabytes with multiple cross-referencing fields?” Gettun's eyes glimmered as she clicked the SEARCH key.” A mere fifteen minutes.*

This oscillation is a non-differentiation between historically situated methods of knowledge and truth production. There is also a remarkable link in the book between riddles and computers. An organically woven connection between the encryption of language and the encryption of numbers. This atemporal aesthetics and semantics of secrecy makes me think of the ‘crisis of time ’caused by the archival crisis of Y2K. Just as the numbers in databases fail to distinguish years, here there is a failure in distinguishing technologies of encryption and deciphering. A dismemberment occurs not only to chronological time, but also to its adjacent technologies.

Langdon and Neveau find a physical key behind the Mona Lisa. This key is old-looking, heavy, materially loaded: “The broad, sculpted head was in the shape of a cross and bore an engraved seal she had not seen since she was nine years old. A fleur-de-lis with the initials P.S.” (chapter 30) However, its functionality is undermined by its symbolism. Jacques Saunière tells Sophie Neveau, “[this] key opens a box [...] where I keep many secrets” (chapter 23), but this ‘opening ’is immaterial rather than an actual mechanical conundrum. Langdon and Neveau use it to enter a parking lot with a car, just like you would use a card. The key does not ‘open ’anything mechanically.

*INSERT KEY. Sophie took the gold laser-pocked key from her pocket and turned her attention back to the podium [...] This key apparently required no turning. Instantly, the gate began to swing open. (Chapter 42)*

We don’t know exactly how this key works, but it most definitely does not work as a key ‘is supposed to work’. Its juxtaposition to the digital (the parking lot screen/sensor) reflects the atemporality and

crossover of technologies and disciplines in *The Da Vinci Code*. In this landscape of technological collage, language and numbers are equated in their ability to conceal and construct reality. Langdon and Neveau have to be equally skilful in thinking mathematically as well as poetically.

On the one hand, they need to know that 13-3-2-21-1-1-8-5 is meant to be read as *O, Draconian devil! // Oh, lame saint! // P.S. Find Robert Langdon*, which requires knowledge from the field of numerology. But then, they also have to see the anagram behind it: *O, Draconian devil! = Leonardo da Vinci; Oh, lame saint! = The Mona Lisa!*, which requires a more visual kind of intelligence. They also have to understand that a text needs to be mirrored, just like Leonard Da Vinci would write his own texts (Chapter 72), which requires the historical knowledge on Da Vinci's biography. This same text, after mirroring it, is a riddle that requires a poetic sensibility to be deciphered.

When opening the cryptex that holds this same text, Langdon and Neveau have to think of a five- letter word that fits the slots of the cryptex, for which they have to have a certain sensitivity to philology. Also, the mechanico-chemical technology inherent to this cryptex has to be dealt with dexterity and agility in order to not destroy the manuscript inside.

Everything is a kind of “manic lateral thinking” (from my poem, “Infodemic Hedonism” for Bridge\*) in all directions and in all fields of knowledge and not in a way that makes the characters “übermenschlich”, but more so in a way that makes them constantly alert, creating a stimulating suspense and cultivating (to borrow Odete's vocabulary) a methodology of paranoia (see Odete's *Paranoid Archeology*).

The characters in the book have a certain kind of hyper-interdisciplinary thinking and problem-solving. The characters solving the puzzle – Sophie Neaveau, Robert Langdon and later also Leigh Teabing – not only think through various methodologies, but also conjugate each other in the whole process. And all the while these characters are being constantly chased by members of the Opus Dei, a secret society which wants to find the treasure first.

We see therefore an interplay of voices between science, symbolism, religion and the emotional memory of the personal biographical realm. And each one of them lacks the necessary tools to solve it alone. The scientific knowledge (embodied by Teabing) cannot operate without the symbolic knowledge (embodied by Langdon) and these would never reach any conclusions without the biographical data (stored within the emotional memory of Sophie Neveau) of Jaques Sanière. At the same time, they need to stay close to the religious and spiritual refraction this treasure has engraved in the world (embodied by the members of Opus Dei, Silas and Bishop Aringarosa).

The whole book tells us a story of undoing of disciplinarian knowledge—the vehicle for power structures to arise and for lies to be fostered. The only constant methodology is translation. If we look at the literature of the Y2K crisis (cf. “Computers in Crisis” Project), we see how so many of these books are complete genre-salads. It is in these times of crisis that suddenly disciplinarian thinking becomes secondary, because fear for the apocalypse reminds us we have to stick together. No matter who you are, you might have a say in this. It is urgent to find something out, to produce the answers to the problem. Of course it’s interesting to see how, in situations of crisis and as evidenced especially in the recent COVID pandemic and itself reflected in the *deus ex machina* of Robert Langdon’s infinite sources of

wisdom, everyone suddenly becomes an expert in everything. This is also a real problem.

The Cursed Assembly not only embraces precariousness and chaos as situational modes of knowledge production, but it also respects the idea of endless translation between the material and the discursive—as well as between disciplines.

The description of Leigh Teabing's office resonates with how we would envision our own headquarters:

*Teabing's „study” was like no study Sophie had ever seen. Six or seven times larger than even the most luxurious of office spaces, the knight's cabinet de travail resembled an ungainly hybrid of science laboratory, archival library, and indoor flea market. Lit by three overhead chandeliers, the boundless tile floor was dotted with clustered islands of worktables buried beneath books, artwork, artifacts, and a surprising amount of electronic gear—computers, projectors, microscopes, copy machines, and flatbed scanners. (Chapter 58)*

### **Riddles & poetics of the apocalypse**

While reading and hearing more about the Y2K bug, one can't stop noticing an obsession with the idea of solving a riddle. The riddle reads more as an urgent problem than something fun. The same race against time we see in the 24-hour plot of *The Da Vinci Code* and all its breathtaking chapters of under 10 pages is to be found with the Y2K-bug. As mentioned, an insane amount of money was invested in *solving* the problem. And the ideas created until then are maybe funny, but also reveal a lot we might not see under the light of emotional sobriety. These eschatological rhetorics are fantasies we would never dare to



step into; they acquire the poetics of a riddle with the same time pressure we observe in *The Da Vinci Code*.

These are some quotes from Y2K-anxious books and TV-broadcasts:

*35 minutes from now, we'll know what's happening in this country, what's happening overall. If there's bug who are gonna crawl all over our computers and if the planes will fall out of the sky. (BBC news coverage from 31st December 1999)*

*Everyone [at Sioux Falls Airport] is waiting for the same thing, the stroke of midnight. Many flights have been cancelled here tonight. That's because of two reasons: first of all people just didn't buy the ticket. (KELOLAND NEWS archive)*

*Like so many other people, I assumed that the problem could be fixed easily by technological experts and that it had limited relevance to my work. Y2K wasn't my problem. It is a major understatement to say that I was wrong. Y2K is my problem and yours. [...] Computer scientists and engineers offer no silver bullet for solving the Y2K problem. In fact, they are the first to admit that we have neither sufficient time nor enough personnel to identify, assess, repair, replace, or "work around" the billions of lines of defective code and date-sensitive microchips prior to January 1, 2000. [...] If telecommunications fail, the pumps won't recognize your credit card. But you get the point. We have created a world in which every system is six software programs or microchips removed from every other system. (Y2K*

*Citizen's Action Guide: Preparing Yourself, Your family, and Your Neighbourhood for the Year 2000 Computer Problem and Beyond, Eric Utne, 1998)*

*In a full-scale Y2K situation, a number of things will go wrong, all at once. It will be worse than any natural disaster we've ever known, because it will be so widespread. [...] First, it will get dark . . . and, in northern areas, cold. Power plants will shut down.*

*[...] Soon people will get thirsty. Some water-treatment plants will be taken down by power outages. [...] Then people will get hungry.*

*[...] Everyone will be trying to contact loved ones or to get somewhere else; the phone system will be overloaded. [...] Hospitals will be choked with emergency cases. They'll have their own power generators and fuel supplies, but there just won't be enough beds, especially if hungry people start looting and fighting ... or cold people start flocking toward the lights to find warmth . . . or air-traffic computers malfunction and planes go down. [...] And that's still not the worst case. (GURPS Y2K: The Countdown to Armageddon, compiled by Sean M. Punch, 1999)*

## End end

From Odete's research into history writing, historical lies and her "Paranoid Archaeology" to my own investigation of deception and illusionism, the philosophical morphology of numbers and the concept of "Neo-Eschatology", *The Da Vinci Code* was a book we felt somehow connected to, somewhere beyond the text, somewhere over the structures which placed at the periphery of literary quality. The Cursed Assembly is an archival practice and research of unintelligibility and of marginal modes of knowledge production. The curse sets the dialogue in motion. What do we think and say when under a curse, a doomed destiny, the prospect of a terrible 'end'? What ideas come out of such an uncomfortable situation? In the same way we see fear, anxiety, delirium and paranoia as sources of generation of ideas. I find the Y2K period to be such a cultural-historical instance binding the qualities of an archival crisis with the epistemic, apocalyptic landscapes of the assembly.

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## 9 Representing Manly Men

### Social Media Images and their Precedents in United States Political Pictures

*Allison K. Lange*

On 27 November 2019, President Donald Trump posted a photoshopped image of his head on a tanned, shirtless, muscular body. Not just any body, it's Sylvester Stallone's, from the 1982 poster for a movie about a fictional boxer, *Rocky III* (Trump, 2019). Trump wears an aggressive expression with pursed lips and arched eyebrows. Light shines off Stallone's oiled muscles and veins. Unlike the original black poster, a red, white, and blue glow circles Trump's head with a halo as though he is Christ himself. The wrestling gear celebrates strength: two red gloves and a celebratory red, white, and blue championship belt with a large golden plate.

Trump and his followers likely embraced this hypermasculine ideal because of anxiety about the ways that their leader did not meet it. A wealthy New Yorker, Trump has proudly been photographed in his homes with gilded, thickly cushioned furniture covered in floral upholstery. Trump is not athletic. He forgoes wrestling like Rocky and instead famously enjoys McDonald's. Trump tans regularly, and meticulously cares for his hair. The week of this post, his position seemed in jeopardy. Trump faced impeachment hearings and rumors

that he'd had a heart attack. However, his image told supporters that this strong patriot was ready to fight.

In pictures of Trump as Rocky, the celebration of this idealized type of white masculinity—requiring physical strength, authority, bravery—is the point. Reality is not. He has never tried to brand himself as a professional politician. In response to his *Rocky III* picture, *The Washington Post* declared on Twitter: “Trump tweets doctored photo of his head on Sylvester Stallone’s body, unclear why” (*The Washington Post*, 2019). The newspaper failed—or chose not—to recognize that the image was a joking meme. Trump’s supporters mocked the post and pointed out that the picture conveyed Trump’s masculine power in a humorous way (Bleau, 2019). In contrast, Trump’s opponents responded by declaring that he was overweight and had breasts (KennZuke, 2019). Accusing him of not living up to masculine ideals was the worst insult they could conjure.

Representing a president with Stallone’s body was not new. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan revived traditional notions of masculine strength to counter the nation’s seeming weakness associated with the Vietnam War. Pictures of Reagan’s head on Rambo’s body became popular, earning him the nickname “Ronbo” (Gescheidt, 1985; Jeffords, 1993). Like Trump, Reagan was a television celebrity before becoming a politician. Trump often praised Reagan’s presidency, and he designed his memes to connect the two men.

President Trump preferred social media as a criticism of traditional journalism, and he designed a celebrity public personae that rejected professionalized forms of political power through his imagery and language (Biressi, 2020; Carlson et al., 2021; Enli, 2017; Ott, 2017; Street, 2004; Wheeler, 2013; Wood et al., 2016). With social media, Trump was able to exert far more power over his public imagery than

past presidents who relied on favorable, artists, editors, and publishers. He can also position himself as one of the people by relying on the same types of social media accounts that many voters do.

Despite these disruptive shifts toward modern images, pictures rooted in the past remain powerful. Trump's social media images represent a backlash to traditional representations of professionalism and journalism, but they still incorporate familiar visual symbols of white patriarchal dominance. Instead of creating fresh images to secure power, public figures like Trump often manipulate historical symbols of masculine authority and physical strength. These representations are rooted in a hierarchical American visual culture—specifically white and patriarchal — that is over 200 years old (Kelly, 2016; Lange, 2020; Lengel, 2011; Longmore, 1988). Some men, especially conservative ones, reinforce the historical link between power and idealized white masculinity to reinforce their political outlooks. Rather than breaking with the past entirely, leaders like Trump choose to integrate familiar, historical visual tropes that are familiar to audiences.

### **Seeing the Past in the Present**

Over a century before Trump's *Rocky III* meme, President Theodore Roosevelt was concerned about representing strong, white masculinity (Hoganson, 1998; Watts, 2003). Roosevelt was as famous for his version of manhood in his own time as he is now. The wealthy New Yorker didn't want anyone to see him as weak or effeminate, so he did everything he could to prove he was the opposite. In his 20s, he went west and worked as a rancher. Later, he lobbied for the 1898 Spanish-American War and eagerly volunteered. Roosevelt became New York's governor in 1899 and vice president in 1901. That fall, he became the



nation's youngest president after President William McKinley's assassination.

He advocated for men to embrace the "strenuous life." In 1899, Roosevelt delivered a speech arguing that men should "not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil." They should oppose "a life of slothful ease" and "timid peace." In contrast, women must be "the helpmeet of the homemaker, the wise and fearless mother of many healthy children" (Theodore Roosevelt, 1901, 3–5). He directed his ideas at middle- and upper-class white women, who were starting to choose college educations and careers over motherhood. Roosevelt, and many like him, worried about the supposed purity of the white race and feared that people of color would take over the nation (Watts, 2003, 56–73). To strike fear in his audience, he argued that "when men fear work or fear righteous war, when women fear motherhood, they tremble on the brink of doom" (Theodore Roosevelt, 1901, 6).

Roosevelt believed that he—and other middle- and upper-class white men—represented the nation and, therefore, needed to uphold traditional gendered virtues to keep society strong. "It is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor," he argued, "that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness" (Theodore Roosevelt, 1901, 22). Roosevelt appealed to the widely held concerns about manly men. Many believed that men needed to go to war, or at least go on adventures in the mythical West, to be men. By the 1890s, the Civil War seemed like a distant memory. Fears that young men living comfortably in cities would become effeminate prompted many leaders to argue in favor of the Spanish-American War and the wars for empire that followed (Hoganson, 1998; Mexal, 2021; Watts, 2003).

The president promoted this brand of masculinity in numerous speeches, articles, and books, but Roosevelt also modeled his vision in

his portraits. He had photographs taken of him dressed as a cowboy at his ranch and astride a horse in his military uniform (Pach Brothers Studio; *Theodore Roosevelt at His Dakota Ranch*). These photographs recalled those of previous powerful military and political leaders before him. Roosevelt's version of manhood was so attractive that publishers knew they could make money by selling them. The year after the Spanish-American War, publishers Kurz & Allison portrayed Roosevelt in a classic military pose that even George Washington would have been familiar with. These publishers had just finished publishing a Civil War print series, so they knew what their audience wanted (Winter, 2001).

In the picture (fig. 1), Roosevelt sits astride a galloping horse wearing his uniform and holding a sword. He looks off into the distance, without fear, even though he is about to enter a battle. The clouds seem to part around him with the sun shining down on this chosen leader. A group of men in the background follows his lead exactly. The artists likely modeled their print after photographs taken of Roosevelt during the Spanish-American War, like this one by the Pach Brothers Studio (fig. 2). Many of Roosevelt's portraits depict a strong white man on a horse or hunting while wearing authoritative suits or a military uniform. His pictures needed to convey that he was as brave, strong, confident, and successful as he expected his fellow monied, white American men to be.

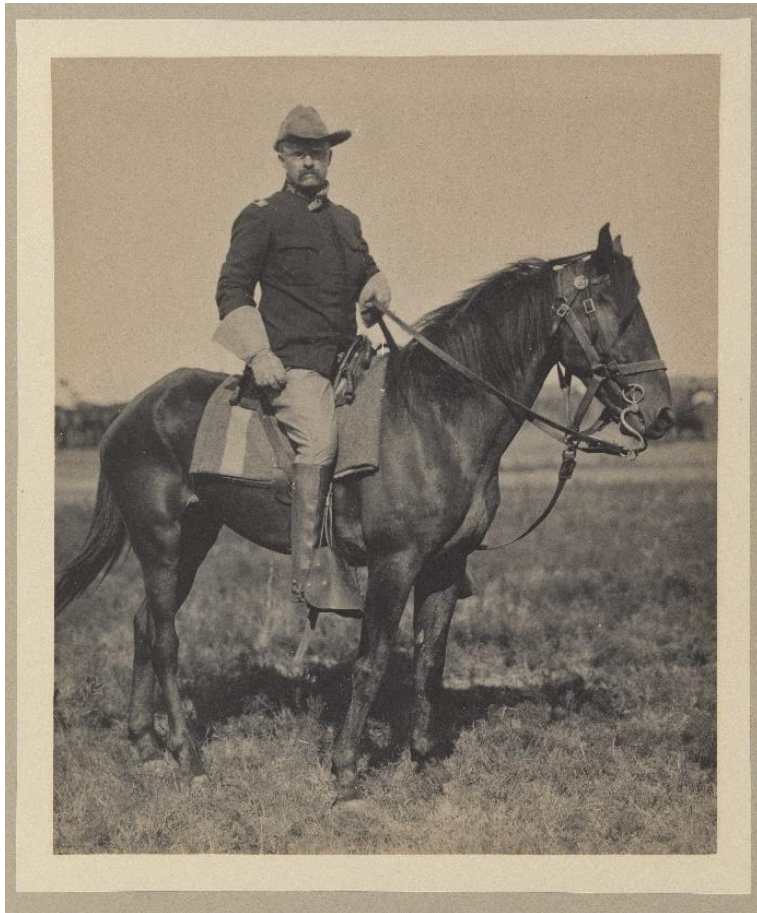
Roosevelt encouraged images like this, but it would have been impossible for him to create, produce, and distribute them on his own without the expertise of a professional photographer or printmaker. In contrast, twenty-first century technology like Photoshop and social media platforms made it relatively simple for Trump. Today, leaders can more effectively provide a model of how they want to be

represented through their social media accounts. These digital images can reach far larger audiences more quickly and cheaply than Roosevelt could have imagined.



**[Fig.1** Kurz & Allison, “Col. Theodore Roosevelt U.S.V.,” lithograph, 1899, Library of Congress.

[https://www.loc.gov/resource/pgs.01899/.](https://www.loc.gov/resource/pgs.01899/)]



**[Fig.2** Pach Brothers Studio, Portrait of Theodore Roosevelt, photograph, circa 1898, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Joanna Sturm.

[https://npg.si.edu/object/npg\\_NPG.81.122.](https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.81.122)]

### **Contrasting Masculine Ideals**

While Trump celebrated a traditional version of white masculinity using a relatively new medium, his opponent in the 2020 campaign, President Joe Biden, offered a fresh image relying on more traditional

forms of journalism. Conversations about gender and race were central to this election. In many ways the two candidates were similar. The two white male politicians are only four years apart in age, grew up on East Coast, and have already been in the national spotlight for decades. But Trump offered an aggressive performance reminiscent of predecessors like Roosevelt and Reagan, while Biden presented a more peaceful version that promoted an openness to other perspectives.

An August 2020 photograph for *People* of Biden with Vice President Kamala Harris demonstrated that the pair were challenging traditional depictions of gender, race, and power (Carlson, 2020). Harris is the powerful one in this scene. The photograph captured a novel, and even triumphant for many, visual event on the presidential campaign stage: a woman of color in the dominant position next to an older, wealthy, white man. The photographer, Gioncarlo Valentine, knew this photograph needed to be different. His website bio says he “aims to broaden conversations around masculinity culture, gender, and belonging” (Valentine, 2023). Valentine and his two sitters used the image to counter long-popular standards for representing gender, race, and political power.

Fashion is central here. Biden sits and wears a tie-less navy suit to appear casual. His pants are hiked up unfashionably high to show off his American flag socks, just like any slightly embarrassing grandfather might. Biden looks similar to past presidents in his traditionally male professional suit, but he’s not emphasizing his strength by standing triumphantly in a military uniform or wearing his ranching gear like Roosevelt. In this photograph, he’s not taking up space. He’s the one leaning in to be closer to Harris. Biden sits in a way that women often do in a portrait with a man: crossed legs and clasped

hands, his body turning toward her. Here, Biden is visually secondary to Harris's primacy.

Trump looked to the past for visual inspiration, but this historic presidential ticket required a fresh picture of power: Harris, a Black and Indian American woman has the spotlight. Positioned higher than Biden, she sits on the wooden tabletop, legs slightly spread. Harris's arms are crossed at the wrist, but she looks ready to make her next big point. Viewers can see her ring, so they know she is a wife. Like Biden, she wears a suit, a nod to the masculine outfit associated with power. However, her feminine heels, the plaid pattern on her jacket, and elegant hairstyle complements it.

Voters chose between two ideas of masculinity, and conversations about Biden's face mask highlights this divide. In the *People* photograph, both candidates wear face masks, a political statement about their coronavirus pandemic concerns. Opponents thought Biden's mask emasculated him. Was he a frail man afraid of getting sick? One commenter on a *Washington Post* article declared that Biden's choice to mask "depicted fear, weakness, lack of leadership and no direction. It displayed that he doesn't know what the future holds" (User "Poisonivies" commenting on Givhan, 2020). Another retorted that "Wearing a mask is a sign of LEADERSHIP" because he wants to "protect others." Trump and the previous commentor were "cowardly," not Biden (User "Mayor Jeremy Harris" commenting on Givhan, 2020).

Pictures like this spark anxieties about a perceived decline of white male power (Givhan, 2020). Since the nation's founding, and even before, artists have used the humor of reversed gender roles as a weapon to police gender roles and create a social order. In these images, men who fail to live up to gendered expectations wear feminine

clothes and do family-oriented tasks, while women who step beyond their domestic roles appear masculine. For example, in 1865, many Americans bought the post-Civil War prints and cartes de visite of ex-Confederate President Jefferson Davis fleeing the United States army while wearing a dress.<sup>5</sup> The pictures entertained audiences, made publishers a lot of money, and policed ideas of gender and political leadership. They still influence the images we see today. The same photographs that win Harris praise as a groundbreaking leader prompt others to fear changes to traditional American values.

### **Endless Digital Possibilities for the Trump Cards**

Trump's 2020 loss suggested that voters were open to Biden and Harris's fresh image of political power. Trump's campaign reinforced traditional notions of male strength and bravery, but Biden challenged this older visual stereotype. Drawing on familiar historical precedents tends appeal to the public, but after four years of Trump's version of power in office, voters were tired of the usual tropes.

However, the appeal of traditional masculinity remains strong. In December 2022, Trump released his first set of digital trading cards that depict him as strong, powerful, athletic, brave, and wealthy. Two cards connect him with the mythical American West and the white men who supposedly conquered it. One shows him on a galloping horse with an American flag and a cowboy hat. In another, Trump dons hunting gear with a six-pointed silver star sheriff pin against a mountainous

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<sup>5</sup> For historical documents on Davis wearing women's clothing see (John W. Daniel 278–79; Markinfield 140). For additional scholarship on the tropes surrounding swapped gender roles, see (Lange, 2020; Manion, 2020; Sheppard, 1994)

Western background, complete with horses. Over a century earlier, Roosevelt had his own versions of both pictures.

With the help of digital technology, Trump's cards feature some innovations since Roosevelt's era. Two pictures depict Trump in Superman-style poses and costumes. Comic books didn't become popular until World War II, after Roosevelt's death. In one, Trump rips off a suit to reveal the red, shiny, tight Super "T" costume, complete with muscular abs. Lasers shoot out of his eyes. The other image features him in the same superhero outfit (with an American flag cape) standing in the classic Superman pose with hands on hips in a wrestling ring.

Even with the use of newer digital technology to alter images and social media, Trump's images of masculinity work because of their familiarity and long history. At the beginning of his infomercial for the digital cards, Trump told his audience he was "hopefully your favorite president of all time, better than Lincoln better than Washington" ("Donald Trump Digital Trading Card NFTs," 2022). In his Truth Social announcement post, he exclaimed that this "amazing ART of my Life & Career" was priced at just ninety-nine dollars an image (Trump, 2022). The digital cards sold out the next day.

The most common type of presidential picture might still be the familiar portraits of powerful men in traditionally masculine attire and poses, but the visual conversation keeps changing. Despite the consistency of many images of male leaders, popular images of political power have significantly changed over the last two decades as more women and gender non-conforming individuals are elected to office. They are challenging men's dominance in political offices and have distributed unprecedented images of female power on digital platforms. This shift only seems to encourage the backlash we see in



images like those promoted by Trump. Historical images of political power remain strong, but there is room for new pictures, new platforms, and new meanings.

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of Your Favorite Trump Digital Trading Cards, Very Much like a Baseball Card, but Hopefully Much More Exciting. Go to Collecttrumpcards.Com/ & GET YOUR CARDS NOW! Only \$99 Each! Would Make a Great Christmas Gift. Don't Wait. They Will Be Gone, I Believe, Very Quickly!" *Truth Social*, 15 Dec. 2022, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/109518512543023262>.

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## 10 Visualizing Moroccan Cultural Dialogics

### Mapping the Micro-Conflictuality of Cultural Modernity on Facebook

*Driss Faddouli*

It is striking how Moroccan online users constantly engage with and perceive of social, political, and cultural issues within Facebook spaces by designing and disseminating a multiplicity of creative, but often provocative, media content. On the one hand, the important mastery of media literacies and the skillful rendition with which the majority of young Moroccans handle information flow demonstrate the significant place that contemporary digital technologies and platforms have in the lives of these digital natives (notably here Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter)<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, the emerging socio-cultural, political, and economic controversies in the Moroccan society constitute an impulsive trigger for these online users to address and reformulate from their own perspectives; for they particularly transfer these issues to the virtual spaces, unconditionally believing that the latter stand as legitimate outlets and entry-points for the articulation

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<sup>6</sup> The Digital Report 2023 on Morocco stated that there were 33.18 million internet users in Morocco at the start of 2023, when internet penetration stood at 88.1 percent; It also reported that Morocco was home to 21.30 million social media users in January 2023, equating to 56.6 percent of the total population. For further information, see Digital 2023: Morocco — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights (20 February, 2024).

and enactment of the underlying power dynamics- an enactment which often sets the stage for many forms of transgressive and hegemonic struggles fought at various levels among the different stakeholders and social agents in Morocco.

In particular, Moroccan Facebookers' inclination to establish and sustain a form of networked visibility can be taken here to stand as an important facet of this struggle. The plethora of visual narratives (memes, cartoons, comics, and image-macros<sup>7</sup>) being circulated within the online spaces demonstrate that these online users are not just passive consumers of digital content. Rather, their creation and circulation of social, political, religious, and cultural visual narratives reflect an energetic attempt to be recognized as influential sociocultural agents in the Moroccan networked sphere. In parallel to their acts of online sociality such as chatting and socializing with other online users, Moroccan Facebookers always retain a critical tendency to constantly intervene into the various sociocultural and political controversies of their society. Their presence online often takes the form of strategic actions which always tend to extensively mobilize the role of the visible sign, speedy reaction, and large sharing.

Importantly, Moroccan Facebookers act on the perception that „what is visible can generally achieve the status of accepted truth” (Alcoff, 2006, 6). They capitalize on the assumption that „the visible dominates not only knowledge but also the expression and mobilization of desire” (Linda Alcoff, 2006, 6). Their creative practices

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<sup>7</sup> An image macro is basically an image onto which a text has been added. Patrick Davidson (2012) defines it as „a set of stylistic rules for adding text to images” (p. 127). For further information, see Davidson, Patrick. “The Language of Internet Memes”. Ed. Michael Mandiberg (Ed.) *The Social Media Reader*. New York: New York University 2012. 120-134

manifested in the visual narratives constantly seek to mobilize and substantiate this perception because the more they become visible signs, the more they invoke „interpretation to discern what is behind them, beyond them, or what they signify” (Alcoff, 2006, 7).

For Moroccan Facebookers believe that a networked visibility is also critical to our understanding of power relations in the Moroccan society. Their endeavor to become visible reveals that they assume the important role of visibility in exposing the dynamics of sociocultural domination and hegemony. With this, visibility becomes an important means of engaging with the notion of power relations and the ways subordinate social actors form social agency. As Nilufer Gole (2002, 387) states, visibility „refers to a choreography of social actors that cannot be fully rendered within the normative framework of recognition of difference”. By resisting to be fully normalized into the hegemonic system, Moroccan visible social actors reinstitute and redefine the struggle over social power ascendancy. They are enabled to take action and disrupt the flow and stability of the underlying hegemonic structures in the society. In this regard, mobilizing ordinary knowledge, exercising power and achieving a social status becomes deeply wedded to questions of visibility and agency which explains why Moroccan Facebookers strive to exploit this understanding of the relationship between subordinate knowledge, visibility, and power relations.

In line with this, Moroccan Facebookers’ speedy reactions to various sociocultural issues in the society also enhance their networked visibility. Within Moroccan online spaces, a great number of Moroccans constantly react to various issues of public concern through a rapid dissemination of the visual content. Images, comics, and cartoons, relevant to the different sociocultural and political issues in



Morocco, constantly flood online spaces reflecting singular perspectives animated by the ordinary Moroccan Facebookers. Likewise, numerous controversial issues have been quickly brought to the fore on online spaces before they could even reach the mainstream media. They have been turned into issues of public concern, thus stirring up national polemics. Such a quick and sustained endorsement of these issues is deeply interwoven with forms of networked visibility, for it suggests the online presence of the Moroccan Facebookers and underscores their versatile practices of action and interaction, manifesting their struggle for recognition. Typical of these instances of the Moroccan youth's reaction and interaction of online content is the stronger urge to express themselves and disclose what they experience and feel as individual subjects and collective subjectivities. It gives insight into another dimension of these reactionary acts. Moroccan Facebookers have been deeply enmeshed into the pleasures of online self-presentation. They have benefited from the technological affordances Facebook provides for those who express themselves and exploit forms of a „despatialized simultaneity” [as] distant others could be rendered visible in the same time-frame, could be heard the very moment they spoke, [and] could be seen at the very moment they acted” (Thompson, 2005, p. 37).

Furthermore, the immense proportion of sharing visual content among the Moroccan online users on networked spaces sharpens their active form of networked visibility. Many online visual narratives are widely shared and circulated among the Moroccan Facebookers. Within the Moroccan online spaces, there are some cartoons which hit more than 1000 shares in a couple of hours. This affirms the proposition that, although there are some Moroccan Facebookers who seem not really interested in practically engaging with the online

content, they nonetheless sympathetically endorse and adopt each other's creations. In fact, the amount and the rate of online sharing among these people in online spaces are not an isolated or irrelevant cultural aspect to be underestimated. Sharing the visual forms means that these online users morally bear and subscribe to each other's perception of the issues. Although it may seem a trivial fact, which goes unnoticed, sharing or even hitting „like”, within these spaces means that the creative output is much important and significant to the other online users who lurk out there waiting for the latest news, events, and controversies. Sharing in this sense represents a unique aspect of visibility because it widely makes the objects, creations, and practices of the Moroccan youth more open, visible and staged for the others. The visibility of ideas, experiences, and perceptions embedded in these creations are „freed from the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now” (Thompson, 2005, p. 34). The following statement further elaborates on this aspect.

The visibility of individuals, actions and events is severed from the sharing of a common locale. One no longer has to be present in the same spatial temporal setting in order to see the other individual or to witness the action or event: an action or event can be made visible to others by being recorded and transmitted to others who are not physically present at the time and place of its occurrence. The field of vision is stretched out in space and may also be stretched out in time: one can witness events occurring in distant places 'live', that is, as they occur in real time; one can also witness distant events which occurred in the past and which, thanks to the preservative qualities of the medium, can be re-presented in the present. Moreover, this new form of mediated visibility is no longer reciprocal in character. The field of vision is uni-directional: the viewer can see the distant others who are

being filmed or photographed but the distant others cannot, in most circumstances, see them. Individuals can be seen by many viewers without themselves being able to see these viewers, while the viewers are able to see distant others without being seen by them. (Thompson, 2005, p. 35)

Therefore, sharing the online creations entails a sophisticated form of visibility that transgresses the boundaries of time and space, particularly on Facebook. It amplifies the significance of this form of visibility because it greatly increases the flow of the audio-visual content into the networks of communication, thus empowering this content to be constantly staged and imposed for a huge number of audiences and spectators.

As such, Moroccan Facebookers manage to reassert and foreground the importance of grassroots knowledge and the critical role of the ordinary people in intervening in public matters. They highlight the agency of the ordinary citizen as a protagonist who is positioned at the heart of the historical and cultural transformation unfolding in Morocco nowadays. It is indeed an agency that is highly motivated by a subaltern reason that aspires to speak for the vulnerable and the oppressed. In this sense, the grassroots knowledge mediated by the forms of networked visibility becomes a means for emancipation and empowerment for the ordinary subject, providing the latter with the operational tools towards summoning up marginalized perspectives and worldviews to the fore. It is a means by way of which previously unrepresented subjects can assert their presence in the society.

This paper, thus, probes Moroccan Facebookers' visual and discursive rearticulations of contemporary sociocultural controversies surrounding issues of cultural modernity as refracted in terms of

religion, individual rights, and sexuality. It particularly examines the visual narratives disseminated by the Moroccan liberals and conservatives as being cultural texts largely representative of the conflictual cultural zones in contact that occasionally give shape to various forms of ideological tension and bipolarization within the Moroccan networked spaces. The paper argues that these cultural texts, while constituting important moments of differential positions, retain visual and articulatory practices which reflect a dialogics of antagonism wherein deeply held sociocultural imaginaries and sensibilities are relationally constructed, mobilized, and contested. It posits that these moments of encounter bring about resonances and fractures whereby new perceptual modalities of subjectivity, collective identity, citizenship, and democracy firmly emerge. As such, the paper has recourse to the theoretical models of Michael Bakhtin as well as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe for their productive possibilities of serving as a conceptual framework with analytical modalities to understand, unravel, and account for the dynamics of the contestatory practices in the visual narratives under study. Given this, the paper initially starts with a brief introduction on the networked dynamics of Moroccan Facebookers, contextualizes their praxis within the poetics and politics of transgression and antagonism, then moves on to examine and analyze the visual narratives in particular, and finally puts in perspective the wider aspects of these practices along with their implicative potential.

### **Conceptualizing the Theoretical Paradigm... Shaping the Descriptive Framework**

It should be emphasized at the outset that this paper largely focused on the visual narratives within Moroccan Facebook spaces more than the

profiles of their producers and disseminators: neither the age, identity, gender, nor the educational background of their producers were of particular interest to the scope of this paper. Such visual forms were accessible to everyone with a Facebook account. Also, it should be notified that these visual forms were mostly the work of Moroccan anonymous individual subjects and collective groups, bore no institutional traces, and thus raised no issue of copyrights. Moreover, the time-frame of the production and circulation of the visual narratives was believed to be highly significant because of its unique historical and socio-cultural context. From 2011 up to 2020, the period represented the aftermath of the controversial Arab Spring in many Middle East and North African countries; nationally, it bore testimony to the huge flocking to social media websites by an ever-growing Moroccan population, particularly as it documented the emerging grassroots tendencies to engage with issues of public interest often in open and defying ways to the state and social conformity. For the scope of this paper, therefore, nine exemplary visual narratives were chosen here, being related with each other not chronologically but thematically.

Conceptually, this paper is situated within the poetics and politics of transgression largely informed by theories of power, hegemony, and resistance. As I deal with the visual narratives which address some of the current cultural issues and controversies in Morocco, I shall have then recourse to the productive possibilities of Michael Bakhtin's influential concepts of the carnivalesque and dialogism as the modes of understanding or, as the cultural analytics (Stallybrass, 1986), for the analysis of the contestatory practices as well as the ideological manifestations that are characteristic of these visual narratives and informative of the versatile cultural issues and

controversies animating the Moroccan networked landscape. In this regard, the term „dialogics” is called upon here because of the connotative force it holds in emphasizing the cultural agency of the different Moroccan stakeholders in contesting and challenging many forms of sociocultural hegemonies and inequalities; it is also called upon here for the illustrative power it has to uncover „the dialogic moments in cultural production and relations where” (Peter Hitchcock, 1993, xii) these stakeholders reclaim their right to inscribe the sign with their own interests and causes. As such, the term integrates and brings together the transgressive possibilities pertinent to the two concepts (the carnivalesque and dialogism), thereby setting in scene and describing the logics of resistance at the service of the Moroccan cultural testers.

Yet, before embarking on the analysis it would be of great interest to elaborate on each of these seminal concepts. In his classic study of Rabelais’s novel, Bakhtin (1984) focused on the cultural aesthetics of folk humor in the cultures of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Bakhtin’s interest in exploring the various manifestations of these cultures was highly triggered by the seemingly pervasive underestimation from which the culture of „the marketplace and folk laughter” suffered (p. 4). Revisiting its peculiar forms, Bakhtin largely defended „the profound originality” of the marketplace culture. He argued that the „folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and the fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers” embodied a stronger sense of opposition to „the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (p. 4). For him, all these comic forms were able to transgress and create a „two-world condition” where they tremendously „acquired a new meaning, were deepened and rendered more complex” (p. 7). More importantly, they became

powerful tools in the hands of the common people and were largely manipulated to defend their interests and causes. Bakhtin (p. 10) further explained this point as follows:

“As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.”

Thus, the carnival symbolized real moments of liberation, change, and renewal that were elusive of the oppressing sociopolitical norms of the time and constituted for the common European people stronger sites for resisting all forms of hegemony and authority. As Robert Stam (1989) remarks, the carnival can be interpreted as a landmine rich of tactics and strategies. It „becomes a resource of actions, images and roles which may be invoked both to model and legitimate desire” (p. 18). Stam’s conceptualization of the carnival taps into the purpose of this section.

While the term carnival may hardly be disassociated from the historical contexts it had been conceived, the concept of the carnivalesque does incorporate and suggest the array of the transgressive practices that the carnival stood for. Importantly, it is strongly invoked here because it helps contextualize the discussion in many ways. First, it „implies an attitude of creative disrespect or radical opposition” (Stam, 1989, p. 19) to the forms of cultural hegemony and social authority. In this respect, the visual narratives giving shape to this paper are highly populated by many contesting viewpoints which

retain the ideological elements subversive of the hegemonic discourses in Morocco. Second, the carnivalesque can be said to provide a vital site for the proliferation of multiple voices, meanings, and subjectivities.

It furnishes the Moroccan cultural contesters with the counter hegemonic means to dismantle the power of the official language or the dominant discourse. Third, it also offers these people the tools to inculcate in their visual representations and practices a sense of „ambivalence, laughter, and subversion” (Shanti, 1999, p. 129) underlying the dynamics of unofficial discourse. Finally, the carnivalesque serves to defend the freedom of thought which intersects with the fundamentals of dialogism, such as perception, thinking, and speaking (Shanti, 1999, 131).

Similarly, the concept of dialogism sheds light on another aspect of Bakhtin’s thought on the relationship between the self and the other, and particularly drives home the sociocultural and political implications this might have on the society. Bakhtin argues that only by coming to recognize the importance of the other can we then cherish the capacity to have consciousness. As Holoquist (1990, 17) argues, „consciousness is otherness”: it is the deferential relation between a center and all that is not that center. Thus, consciousness and knowledge mainly evolve from one’s relationship with the other subjectivities. Holoquist further explains this point as follows: Dialogism argues that all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying simultaneous but different space, where bodies may be thought of as ranging from the immediacy of our physical bodies, to political bodies and to bodies of ideas in general (ideologies) (p. 19).

Therefore, the contact between oneself and the other selves is what guarantees the generation of meaning and knowledge since each



one of these subjectivities possesses and enjoys what Bakhtin calls a „surplus of seeing“. Holoquist (1981, p. 85) elaborates on this point as follows:

“The aspect of the situation that you see, but I do not, is what Bakhtin calls your “surplus of seeing”; those things I see but you cannot constitute my “surplus of seeing.” You know I have a surplus, and I know you have one as well. By adding the surplus that has been “given” to you to the surplus that has been “given” to me I can build up an image that includes the whole of me and the room, including those things I cannot physically see: in other words, I am able to “conceive” or construct a whole out of the different situations we are in together. I author a unified version of the event of our joint existence from my unique place in it by means of combining the things I see which are different from (in addition to) those you see, and the things you see which are different from (in addition to) that difference.”

As is stated, through interacting with each other individuals can come to construct a „whole out of different situations“. In other words, they become able to form a complete understanding of a certain situation from the variety of viewpoints, stances, and experiences in which they are involved. Yet, for a dialogic relationship to sustain, it must become an utterance embodying a certain discourse. It must entail or „become the positions of various subjects expressed in discourse“ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 183), retaining what Bakhtin (p. 9) calls „a plurality of unmerged consciousnesses“ that stand in stark opposition to the monologic or authoritative voice often residing in the official discourse. Therefore, a dialogic relationship „defines itself in

contradistinction to the low or everyday speech types found in the street, in the marketplace, and the public square” (Gardiner, 2000, 61) to preserve the boundaries between „the legitimate and illegitimate language-use”. Gardiner elaborates on this idea as follows:

This drive to unify the verbal-ideological world is never completely successful. Accompanying this centripetal tendency towards integration are (more or less powerful) centrifugal processes that continue unabated. The latter – which Bakhtin identifies increasingly with ‘folk-festive’ genres of ordinary people – operate to ensure the subversion and dis-unification of the officially sanctioned language system from within (p. 61).

Thus, one of the reasons the concept of dialogism would be of great interest in the analysis of this paper is that it allows us to comprehend how „the proliferation of socio-ideological points of view in modern society end the hegemony of a single and unitary official language and worldview” (Gardiner, 2000, p. 61). As Gardiner indicates, it enables us to explore the „plurality of cultural-semantic and emotional intentions that are inscribed within everyday social relations” makes room for the dominated social classes, groups, or individuals to dialogize the monological discourses in the society as well as multiply the resistant meanings and values in the signs they use (pp. 59-61).

Methodologically, this paper engages the productive possibilities of Visual Social Semiotics<sup>8</sup> to analyze the visual forms in concern, for it

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<sup>8</sup> Visual Social Semiotics draws on a wide range of sources and theories. Halliday’s social semiotic view of language (1978) represents here one of the most important theories which has influenced Visual Social Semiotics. Kress, Gunther. & Leeuwen, Theo van. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Routledge 2007. Leeuwen, Theo van. & Jewitt, Carey. (Eds.). *Handbook of Visual Analysis*. London: Sage Publications

strongly sustains a rigorous multimodal framework of analysis that is attendant and open to various modes and modalities of communication: verbal, nonverbal, spatial, aural, and embodied. From this perspective, Visual Social Semiotics, thus, gives shape to a well-informed approach capable of studying how meanings and representations are articulated, rendered, and projected via a variety of forms and media, be that language, images, comics, or graffiti, to mention but a few. Operationalizing such a framework of analysis should accordingly help us uncover and identify the wider array of semiotic options and communicative potentialities inherent in the visual narratives under study.

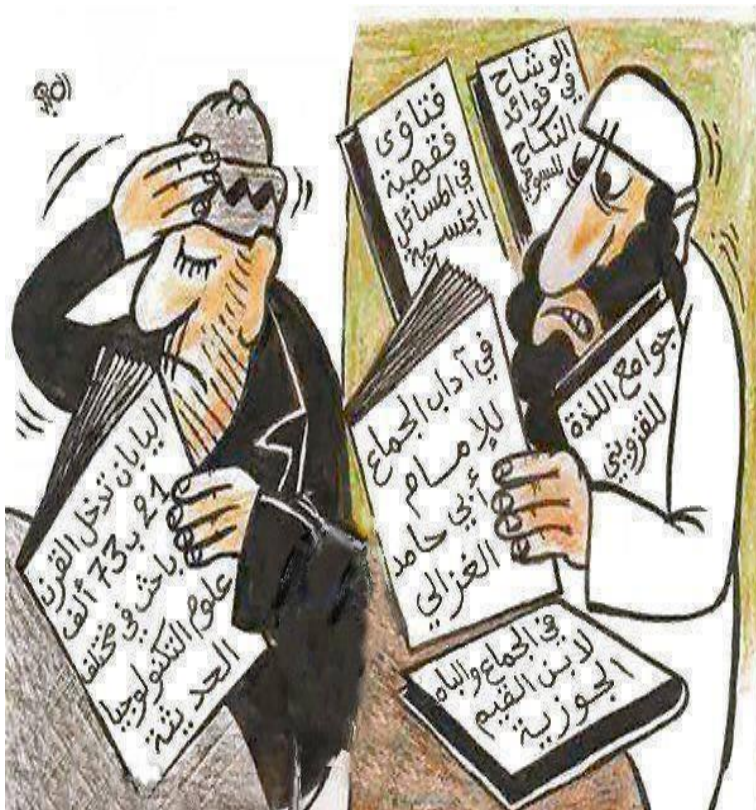
As an analytic approach, Visual Social Semiotics best suits the purpose of this paper. It offers a descriptive framework for the visual analysis of the different cartoons and comics under study. It provides a meaningful description of the major compositional structures contributing to the production of these cartoons and comics. In other words, the approach provides us with an informative grasp of the underlying layers of meanings inherent in visual structures and how they are mapped across different semiotic modes in our objects of analysis. Besides, the approach offers ways to understand the ideological side of visual communication and how ideological positions might be articulated in some of the visual regularities observed in the images, cartoons and comics.

Specifically, Visual Social Semiotics provides us with a practical framework consisting of three basic layers of analysis (representational, interactive, and compositional). The

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2001. Leeuwen, Theo van. *Introducing Social Semiotics*. New York, USA: Routledge 2005.

representational dimension reveals the semiotic modes and structures which help image makers to represent the world in its concrete and abstract aspects. It then enables us to spot the different constitutive elements, featuring the ideational aspects of the images, cartoons or comics. At the interactive level, we are enabled to identify the various semiotic resources developing the interpersonal or relational social intersections between the image maker and the viewers. As for the compositional layer of analysis, it shapes our understanding of the underlying aesthetic or artistic elements, distinguishing the internal coherence of the cartoons and comics.



[Fig.1 Pleasures.]

## Mapping Zones of Micro-Conflictuality

In line with this, *Pleasures* and *Fatwa* [a religious verdict] (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) represent a secular ideological attack on the fanaticism of Moroccan fundamentalists. They work to expose the drawbacks of this type of extremism in the society.

*Pleasures* (see Fig. 1) constitutes a visual parody of the perceived religious fanaticism of the Moroccan fundamentalists. It criticizes what it considers to be as the latter's falsified understanding of Islam. In the representation, two Moroccan ordinary citizens are featured as being engaged in the act of reading: one is reading a newspaper which reports that „Japan has trained 73000 of researchers in several technological domains” [My Translation]; the other is caught in the midst of numerous classic guides for sexual intercourse written by some Muslim scholars. The fundamentalist is depicted in a striking way; being portrayed with long beard and in an *Afghani* dress, his facial expressions, by way of a medium high shot, are highly emphasized to foreground the latter's extreme obsession with his own sexual potency and carnal desires. The fact that he is being completely wrapped into the sexual guides translates the fundamentalist's unrestrained lust for the profane and earthly pleasures. Indeed, as the representation entangles and confines the fundamentalist into his own sexual desires, it manages to level direct criticism at these religious groups in Morocco. It subverts the tenets and the aspects of their religiosity. Conversely, the man with the newspaper is introduced to stand for the secular or the common Moroccan citizen. He stands as the counterpart version to the fundamentalist. He is meant to embody the secular vision of the liberal groups and parties in Morocco.

In the same vein, *Fatwa* [a religious verdict] (see Fig. 2) constitutes a travesty of the religious decrees in Morocco. It features an

ordinary citizen in an extremely hilarious reaction at hearing a religious decree issued by a passing-by fundamentalist. The open mockery of the religious figure and the ideological background for which the mocking man stands takes the viewer by surprise. It openly undermines the religious figures and institutions in Morocco. In contradistinction to the previous representation, this one makes the ideological power struggle much pronounced and manifest. While the first representation alludes to the ideological pitfalls in the fundamentalist perception of a number of sociocultural issues, the present one declares its underestimation of fundamentalism in Morocco.



**[Fig.2 Fatwa.]**

As far as the visual composition of the cartoon is concerned, *Pleasures* (see Fig. 1) is rendered through the visual analytical process, for the two men are constructed as the carriers whereas the beard, the *Afghany* gown, the classical references, and the newspapers are portrayed as their possessive attributes. As such, the visual analytical process lays emphasis on the attributes of the carriers. It provides the viewer with the key to renounce and reject the fundamentalist thought. Also, the concepts of „the left” and „the right” are suggestive in the representation. The secular man is positioned on „the left” to reiterate the idea that this is a given, usual fact: people read different newspapers, novels, stories, and attend plays as well as musical performances worldwide. However, the man with the beard is placed on „the right,” to stress this peculiar social phenomenon.

The framing lines in the cartoon are deployed to enhance this difference. The man with the beard is put into a square frame in the seemingly dark color to suggest that he is imprisoned to his own earthly desires. He cannot free himself from the parochial social environment and the historical period in which he is immersed. Conversely, the man with the hat is put into different framing lines with a white background to emphasize that he is increasingly inspired by the widening horizons of his social environment and modern time. Hence, the representation constitutes an ideological attack on fundamentalism in Morocco.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the two visual narratives constitute an ideological interrogation of religious conservatism in Morocco. They satirize the latter’s values and convictions. They can be said to have exploited two different transgressive forms to convey their message. In *Pleasures* (see Fig. 1), the visual parody of conservatism functions as a transgressive form. The contrast and comparison are exploited to parody the character of the *Salafi*, or the fundamentalist.

They establish a mode of tension or rupture in the visual narrative, thus driving the viewer to reject the fundamentalist values. The viewer is then highly cued to situate oneself within this dialectic and stand by the perception the visual narrative offers. In *Fatwa* (see Fig. 2) travesty in turn represents the transgressive form. Religious issues, scholars, and even *fatwas* or decrees are largely ridiculed in the visual representation.

The religious decree, which a large number of Muslims, especially fundamentalists hold dear to their hearts, is relegated to stand on an equal footing with the joke, *noukta*. The representation in fact questions the recent surge of *fatwas* in the Moroccan society issued by many *salafis* [religious fanatics], while the voice of many contemporary scholars in various fields of study is largely discouraged. Therefore, *Pleasures* and *Fatwa* inscribe a dialogic relationship between two contradictory discourses: the fundamentalist and the liberal. They come to document the emergence of the liberal voice and how it negates and dialogizes the fundamentalist discourse. Particularly, *Pleasures* is informed by the logic of coexistence and interaction visually embodied in the strategic manipulation of „dramatic juxtaposition of contradictory elements in one time-frame” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 28). That is, all the contrasts, conflicts, aspects, and particularities pertaining to a certain social or cultural issue, regardless of their particular timing, are brought together in one space. In this regard, the figure of the ordinary man substantiates the liberal voice. It refutes and dismantles its fundamentalist counterpart in the representation. Words such as „the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” „Japan,” „technology,” and „modern” present a suitable response to what they consider to be as backwardness and deterioration in the example of the fundamentalist. They supersede words such as (لدة) (read as *ladda*,

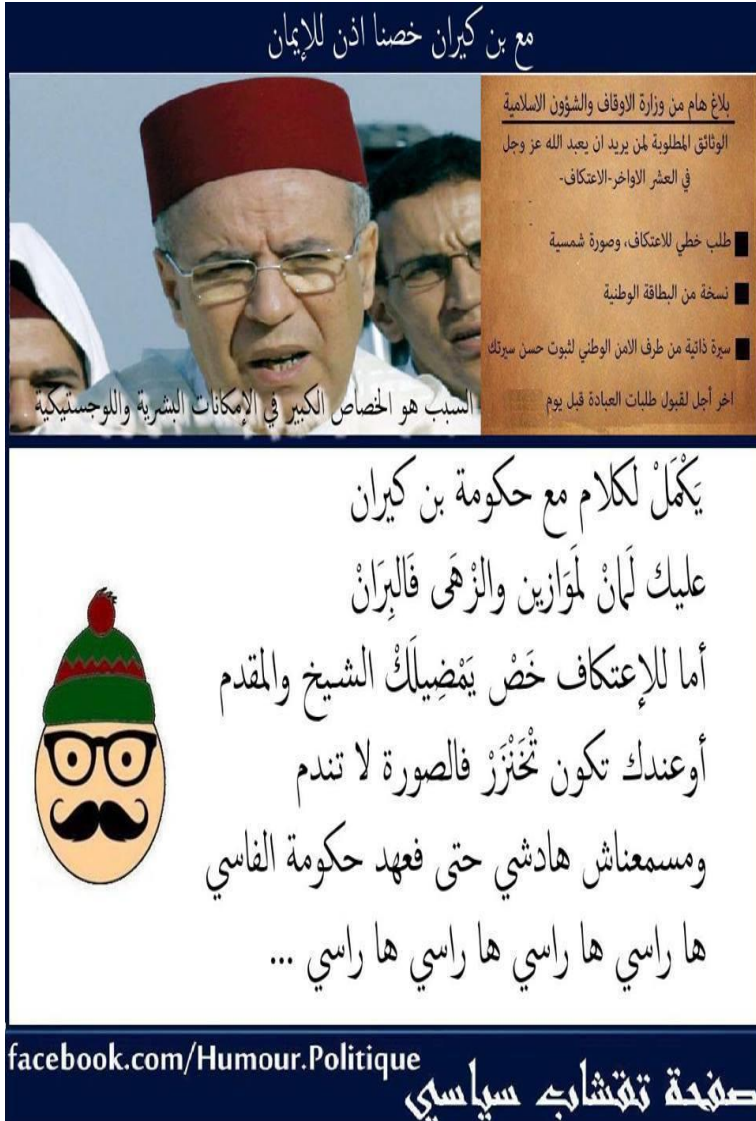


lust), (الغزالي) (read as *Al Ghazali*), (ابن الجوزي) (read as *Ibn Zawji*), (جماع) (read as *jimaa*, sexual intercourse), and (الباه) (read as *albah*, sexual potency).

The liberal voice in the visual narrative brings these words into focus, in an attempt to transgress the historical and cultural boundaries imposed on the viewer. It exposes the inhibiting spirit of fundamentalism in Morocco. By means of juxtaposing and counterposing the two voices in the representation, the visual narrative then dramatizes in space the existing contradictoriness of the two discourses with the view to emphasizing the liberal voice. Similarly, *Fatwa* (see Fig. 2) establishes its dialogic relationship in the representation by delineating and displaying different consciousnesses in interaction. The liberal consciousness in the visual narrative, adopted by the mocking person uttering (نكتة) (read as *noukta* the joke) is deliberately brought into interaction with the fundamentalist consciousness. Therefore, the liberal consciousness is summoned here to stand in an intense relationship with that of the fundamentalist since they embody two opposing poles. This is further exemplified by the use of two contradictory terms: *fatwa* and *noukta*. The words are strikingly loaded with meanings. In particular, the term *noukta* is highly filled with struggle and is retaken by the liberals to document the historical development of the liberal consciousness and its rise to cultural power in Morocco.

As such, the visual narratives construct a dialogic moment at which, borrowing Renate Lachmann's (1989) statement, the word „marks itself as response” (as cited in Gardiner, 2000, p. 46). Representing and embracing their voice, the words or utterances carved within the realm of the representations above manifest a dialogical and responsive understanding that cuts through the

fundamentalist position and enriches the liberal stance. They participate in the formulation of the liberal discourse in Morocco, carving a discursive space for the latter and mobilizing public opinion for its cause.



[Fig.3 Permission to believe.]

As a matter of fact, the utterances carnivalize the fundamentalist field of religious discursivity and enact a social event where „signs answer other signs” (Gardiner, 2000, p. 47). They implicate the meanings of the other (in this case, that of the fundamentalists) in an ambivalence that gives way to enclose ones’ value position (in this case, that of the liberals). As such, it becomes hard for the fundamentalist words (thus discourse) to assume, in the Bakhtinian sense, a centrifugal or hegemonic position. Besides, the more this meeting of two opposed ideological positions is staged, the more it invites the viewer to situate oneself into this dialogical debate.

In contradistinction to *Pleasures* and *Fatwa, Permission to Believe* (see Fig. 3) upholds the discourse of the fundamentalists in Morocco, for it problematizes the right to religious practice. It features the Minister of *Waqf* and Islamic Affairs along with an official announcement that specifies the credentials required of those who intend to perform seclusion at mosque (اعتكاف) (read as *Ettikaf*) during the Holy Ramadan. Particularly, the image macro juxtaposes a powerful statement in reaction to the official requirements. Being formulated in the Moroccan Arabic, the statement comes in the form of a lyrical song that takes issue with what it considers to be as the impossible demands. It states that these requirements constitute a step backward in the history of human rights in Morocco.

The parody of the official announcement constitutes the transgressive act in the visual narrative. It exploits pastiche and bricolage to foster its worldview. The visual narrative carnivalizes the issue of concern by way of capitalizing on the poetic and lyrical mode of the Moroccan Arabic: one that sounds almost similar to *malhoun* songs. With this, it establishes an ambivalent site which orchestrates and reshuffles all the elements of the image macro into a dialectic

relationship, one that stages one facet or meaning of the sign and, in the meantime, brings about its antithesis. Besides, the lyrical statement further profanes the official announcement and exposes its inconsistency and contradiction. It penetrates deep and breeds contempt into it by messing with its foundational signs, using abusive words such as (الزها) (read as *ezzha*, (debauchery), (بران) *biran* (bars), and (تندم) (read as *tandam*, (regret).

The official announcement is then both subverted and inverted. In fact, the visual narrative constitutes a transgressive act of renewal and change. The carnivalization of the announcement resists the state's hegemonic act to normalize and dominate the field of religious discursivity. It emphasizes the polyphony or multiplicity of discourses, enriching this field as being a site for „unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6) that contest for a place inside this realm. Thus, the controversy over the issue of individual rights represents a second front in the struggle between the liberals and the fundamentalists.

Similarly, *Sayti Horiyati* (see Fig. 4) (My skirt is my freedom) [My Translation] gives a glimpse into another aspect of the social change and cultural debate presently taking place in Morocco. It gives insight into the debate about the issue of individual rights in Morocco and how both the conservative and liberal groups conceptualize this issue.

*Sayti Horiyati* is an image taken from the demonstration of some liberal women against what they consider to be as the abuse of individual rights in Morocco<sup>9</sup>. The demonstration claims that „both

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<sup>9</sup> The demonstration was instigated by a recent incident in Agadir in which two young girls, being reported to have been dressed in short skirts, were aggressed publicly by a group of conservative passers-by. The incident was

Moroccan men and women have the right to civil rights [and that] women's skirts are signs of their freedom" [My Translation]. On the one hand, the image represents the visual structure of „the offer" because it introduces the social and political demands voiced by these women, and invites the viewer to reflect upon them, if not to take sides with the advocates. On the other hand, the image embodies a transgressive act adopted by the liberals against the conservative groups in Morocco. It exemplifies a stronger instance of the „hidden dialogicality" (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 197) between the discourse of the liberals and the fundamentalists.

Although it does not directly foreground or stage the opponent's statements or positions for refutation, the visual narrative implicitly takes the „second speaker" into consideration. The fundamentalist voice, being the second speaker in this case, is nonetheless invisibly present. Although the second speaker's words are not there in the visual narrative, they have left deep traces and, thus, have a determining influence on all the present and invisible words of the first speaker (in this case the liberal women). Therefore, words, phrases, and statements such as „my skirt is a sign of my freedom," „individual rights," and „Moroccan women" inter-textually respond and react to the opponent calls of the fundamentalists in other contexts and situations in Morocco. They defend the subjectivities of the liberal women against the discriminating claims propagated online and offline by the Moroccan fundamentalists. In this sense, the visual narrative represents a transgressive act embodied in the form of a dialogic

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initially reported on social networking websites and later became the major issue of mainstream channels, thus instigating wider social and cultural debates among Moroccan civil associations.

interaction. Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1984b, 197) explains this relationship as follows:

“We sense that this is a conversation, although only one is speaking and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person.”



[Fig.4 Sayti Horiyati.]



**[Fig.5 A New Style.]**

Given this, the visual narrative represents an expressive act that is reflective of a singular and dialogical moment: singular as it reflects a mature feminist consciousness that is aware of its historical location and dialogical as it interrogates the fundamentalist and the patriarchal system of thought and social authority.

In line with this, *A New Style* (see Fig. 5) also offers a mocking response to the conservative discourse on the issue of *Niqab*, or the body veil of some Muslim women. The image introduces two young women in the street wearing a special kind of *Niqab*, which audaciously

looks like a short pair of skirts, displaying the thighs of the two girls. It clearly refashions, if not distorts, the *Niqab* as a long dress often made of fabrics with dark colors covering the woman from head to toe. Artistically, the image is but a repurposing of a photograph of two girls walking in the street but it is retouched to mock the fundamentalist style of life, notably their parochial understanding of women's rights in Islam.

Conversely, *The Right to Kisses* (see Fig. 6) embodies a stronger fundamentalist response to the previous visual narratives. It comes to dialogically engage with their underpinning voice in an attempt to refute their arguments. The image macro is rendered in the form of a photomontage in which a variety of pictures taken from different public events are made into a single image to articulate the point of the image maker. It brings to life the most unforgettable and the most vivid scenes which marked these societal controversies: ones related to the controversy of Agadir (my skirt...my freedom), the demonstration for sexual freedom in Morocco, the demonstration for the equal share in heritage, and the statement of a politician introduced to the reader as calling for the right to paid retirement for parliamentary representatives.

What is remarkable about the photo montage is that it represents and gives shape to a satirical discourse, since it profanes and plays with the constitutive concepts and meanings advocated by the liberals on the same issues (freedom, equality, sexual freedom, and individual rights) to criticize the same discourse. The visual signs also render these expressions or statements more hostile to the original discourse in which they are formulated, more inert and more prone to collapse.





[Fig.6 The Right to Kisses.]



**[Fig.7 My Body Belongs to Allah.]**

The conservative discourse here „invests these expressions with a new value accenting it in its own way with expressions of doubt, indignation, irony, mockery, and ridicule” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 194). In fact, the photomontage exploits what Hal Foster (1985) calls „the archival impulse”. It re-uses archival material (the scenes from the demonstrations) in a particular way to reinterpret history and bring about symbolic interventions and distortions in the modern Moroccan sociocultural realities (Foster, 1985, p. 168). By exploiting this archival impulse, the photomontage indeed works to sabotage the sources’

messages (Eduardo Navas et al., 2015, p. 425). As such, the visual narrative rhetorically instills in the liberal discourse a subversive semantic intention that deeply unsettles and shakes it to foundation.

In the same vein, *My Body Belongs to Allah* (see Fig. 7) also upholds a direct response to the visual narrative of *Sayti Horiyati* (see Fig. 6). It is a photograph of an anonymous girl who displays the upper-part of her body while she is keeping her head and face off frame and is holding a handwritten note which reads: „my body belongs to Allah; so, I have to cover it” [My Translation], and ends with the letter „D,” standing for laughter<sup>10</sup>.

The photograph indeed enacts a hidden dialogicality between conservatism and liberalism. Although there are no liberal utterances or signs in the photograph, the viewer nonetheless realizes that the photograph reacts or responds to the invisible utterances of the liberal discourse and attempts to come to grips with it. One realizes that the speaker in the image (in this case, the girl under cover) speaks to the first speaker in *Sayti Horiyati* (see Fig.6). Therefore, although the liberal voice is implicit in this photograph, it still leaves its traces, signs, and ideological positions.

In accordance with Figures 6 and 7, this one (see Fig. 8) problematizes the way Moroccan women are represented in the mainstream media and highlights the major contradictions implicating this process of representation. It questions what it conceives to be as

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<sup>10</sup> The photograph bears on the controversy of Agadir which was widely spread within Moroccan networked public sphere at the time when two girls dressed in short skirts were aggressed by an anonymous group for their “indecent way of clothing”; it reflects the aftermath of the incident and how Moroccan Facebookers were mobilized to take side in this debate, thereby motivating a number of girls to speak their mind, using a special style of addressing the public as in this photograph.

„the formal or falsified” representation of Moroccan women in the media that is often corroborated by the news reports about the progressive transformation of Moroccan women’s status.



[Fig.8 The Moroccan Woman.]

To refute this falsified representation, the image capitalizes on the use of direct, unmediated contact or merging of two conflicting and opposing set of visual signs. It brings to contact the image of some controversial Moroccan celebrities in clear opposition to the images of two poor ‘mule’ women surviving the daily hardships. The conjuring up

of the scenes in one time frame, though not one space frame, intensifies this unexpected meeting of the two social realities.

As regards its visual composition, the image macro presents itself in the form of a visual offer, since it introduces the protagonists as targets for the viewers' investigation. By virtue of this visual strategy, the viewers are motivated to identify the huge difference between the two representations of the same subject. Other visual elements also have significant representational roles in the image macro. For instance, the image macro employs the visual notions of „top and bottom“. While it places the celebrities „on top“ to give the impression that this is „ideal“ and inspiring, it immediately subverts this proposition by referring the viewers back to the headline that reads: „this is only in the media“ [My Translation]. Thus, it leaves much room for the viewers to infer that this process of mediatization is faulty and remains „unreal“. However, the two poor women in the abject situations are positioned „in bottom“ to remind the viewers of „the real“ conditions of the Moroccan woman. To further consolidate this claim, or perhaps even refute any potential change in their status quo, the image macro capitalizes on the significance of the dividing lines in the two frames. It horizontally draws a salient, black, and an uncrossed dividing line between the two image macros.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the image represents the unofficial, marginal stand on the issue of women in Morocco. The juxtaposition of these two opposing scenes embodies a transgressive act since it works to criticize the existing contradiction between the state discourse on the situation of women and what the image macro considers to be as their social reality. It gives rise to a sense of tension and conflict in the narrative as the sequence of the photos brings about a new reality in the minds of the viewers. Indeed, this juxtaposition

brings to the task and undermines the official discourse on the issue of Moroccan women.



**[Fig.9 A Woman for Rent.]**

Likewise, *A Woman for Rent* (see Fig. 9) carnivalizes the same issue by using black humor to create surprise and shock the viewer. The cartoon features two rural men engaged in a conversation; one is asking the other whether he can „borrow his wife to carry some firewood for him since his donkey is sick” [My Translation]. The adjoining of words such as „donkey, borrow, wife, carry, and wood” to describe the woman disturbs the viewer. Thus, the immense act of humiliation and indignity inflicted upon the woman marks off the climax of this representation.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the cartoon embodies a transgressive act which carnivalizes the social reality and defies the patriarchy in Morocco. Using black humor to convey its message, it attempts at dismantling traditional assumptions about women, especially in rural areas. The laughter it triggers is meant to raise feelings of disgust and rejection in the viewer. It deploys humiliation as a strategic choice to convey the message. With this degrading representation of rural women in Morocco, the visual narrative attempts to regenerate, relocate, and rearticulate the debate anew, thus bringing about a new birth of rural women in the Moroccan society.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the different visual narratives formulated online by Moroccan Facebookers, as they strongly evoked the transgressive and hegemonic dynamics of power in the Moroccan society. It has analyzed the visual and discursive rearticulations of contemporary sociocultural controversies surrounding issues of cultural modernity as refracted in terms of religion, individual rights, and sexuality. It has particularly investigated the visual narratives disseminated by the Moroccan liberals and conservatives as being cultural texts largely representative of the conflictual cultural zones in contact that have occasionally given shape to various forms of ideological tension and bipolarization within the Moroccan networked spaces. The paper has posited that these cultural texts, while constituting important moments of differential positions, retained visual and articulatory practices which reflected a dialogics of antagonism wherein deeply held sociocultural imaginaries and sensibilities were relationally constructed, mobilized, and contested. It has claimed that these moments of encounter brought about



resonances and fractures whereby new perceptual modalities of subjectivity, collective identity, citizenship, and democracy firmly emerged.

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